S A C R O S A N C T

M I R I A M H A D A D

For Mile Phakphum Romsaithong, who chased a dream until it became the butterfly to my storm

CHAPTER ONE

The Boneyard is dry and dusty and full of rats.

It's the first thing you notice there, even before the shelled-out buildings and other ruins of a place obliterated in totality from a single blow: skeleton car frames, the metal husks of heavy machinery frozen in place and time. Charis doesn't know much about mechanics, but it's obvious just by looking that they would never run again. Nothing here would.

Dust has a smell when it's surrounded by this much destruction. It smells like iron and ash, and like gunpowder, too, if you're really paying attention. Charis has been to enough of these places to know that they are also usually deathly quiet but for the apocalyptic creatures that are most at home in the ruins: barrel rats, the product of radiation and resolve, so contaminated with it that they bleed purple and are often disfigured beyond recognition.

There's sound coming from somewhere, though. Plural sound, the kind of wall of it only hundreds of voices can make at the same time. It's coming from somewhere below, but it's impossible to tell exactly where. The ruined street where he's been dropped off looks mostly flat where he's standing.

The transport driver is looking at him.

"You sure this is the right place?"

Charis isn't sure at all. He isn't sure about any of this, just knows that he'd seen a message flash on his older brother Karra's skin monitor that morning when he'd been rooting around in the fridge, telling him to meet at Old Forge at 1900.

Charis had never heard of that place, and he hadn't been able to find much when he'd tried to look it up by name on the mainframe. Karra has been disappearing for long enough by now, though, that Charis is highly suspicious he is involved in something illegal, in which case it wouldn't *be* on the mainframe. So he'd taken a deep breath, counted to ten, and fired up the off-system bypass his friend Leon had configured for him so they could watch pirated Earth shows the mainframe didn't have—from there, it had taken him less than five minutes.

From there, Charis sat down on the nearest barstool, scrolling through the first few forum hits on the holoscreen that had materialized in front of him over the kitchen counter while he poked half-interested at the breakfast the kitchen had conjured up for him this morning. A whole-grain pastry of some kind covered in preserved fruit, the kind of thing that has to be imported from off world. He'd gotten as far as an address, then the implications of Karra going to a place only discoverable on the off-system caught him by the heel and Charis was calling for a transport almost before he'd gotten his shoes on.

Which was how, some thirty minutes later, Charis finds himself nodding at the transport driver as he looks down between what's left of two buildings, following the only motion he's seen on the street aside from a vibrantly red rodent making a break for it under the upturned bed of a dump truck. The sight would have been more alarming were there not a long trail of vibrantly red paint leading into the driveway from the corner of the half-building he's technically been delivered to.

Weird. Why are people painting here—

“Makorn,” the driver says after clearing his throat.

Charis feels a momentary shock at the Arkane honorific, enough that there’s a long beat before Charis remembers he’s been spoken to. The title is one of the only Arkane words most of the lower classes know—the word for *body*, in the sense of an elite, collective corpus the speaker isn’t part of.

Charis hates it, but this man is just trying to be respectful. He wheels around to face the driver.

“Yes, it’s fine! Don’t worry about it.”

“Will you be needing a pick-up?”

Charis has never met this guy in his life, but instead of the detached deference he’s used to getting from everyone in the lower classes, he finds a look of genuine concern in the driver’s eyes as he looks between Charis and wherever the rat had run off to. *He must have kids*, Charis thinks. He looks old enough for them to be nearly grown if he does.

Charis smiles, shaking his head. “No, but thank you. Have a good rest of your day!”

He offers a quick bow to the driver just to see him get flustered, then turns on his heel, smiling a bit to himself as he slides a thumb into his sleeve and sends the man a tip four times more than the cost of the ride.

It feels good to be able to do this, Charis thinks as he starts walking down the path. Since their parents died, he and Karra have had more money than they know what to do with. Far more than they can ever use. And worse, each of their

respective incomes means the amount never reduces. If the world still used paper money, he could literally open his bedroom window and let stacks of it fly into the wind and it wouldn't matter.

Even though they live in the Vizor and everyone they live near is Sacrosanct, and therefore the last people on either Earth *or* Arkana who need the money. But that's not the point.

The dust of the Boneyard is fine and airborne enough that as Charis walks down the hill, it's immediately all over his shoes. In fact, the further down he goes, the more the air smells like it—burnt, somehow. Ashy. He suddenly wishes he'd brought a mask. But he's at least wearing long sleeves, and breathing through the fabric takes the edge off the smell.

He's been to the Boneyard before. A lot, in fact. But never this far into it. The whole district had once been a bustling center for manufacturing and trade, back before the third nuclear winter, when its inhabitants and businesses had been centered around a mine on the other side of the barren spine of the butte that rings this part of the city. This far out, it was supposed to be deserted.

Two people suddenly appear on the path in front of him. They've walked around the side of one of the buildings he'd passed on the way down, as though they're avoiding the streets. They're a man and a woman, from what it looks like. The man, who has wavy, dusty brown hair to his shoulders and is dressed head to toe in shredded black and chains, is so tall and thin he looks a bit like a swaying tree, aside from the metal. The woman is at least two heads shorter than him with long, orange hair she's pulled over one shoulder, leaving the upside-

down, five-pointed star inside a circle that's painted in silver on the back of her shirt clearly visible.

Charis doesn't know what the symbol means. The desire to look it up makes his fingers itch. For some reason, though, pulling up his sleeve and revealing his skin monitor seems like a bad idea.

The man and the woman stop at the opposite corner of the building Charis was dropped off in front of, the length of which has spanned the entire way Charis has walked so far. At least a good hundred meters to the road. He sees a pair of hands from some invisible third person move briefly in the air, taking something small and black from the man before handing back what looks like a small red bottle a few beats later. The two continue on.

After a moment, there's a loud noise, then cheering. Charis's curiosity triples.

He picks up the pace, half-jogging the rest of the way down the hill, until he rounds the corner and stops.

There's a man there. He looks like he's Karra's age, dark hair reaching halfway down his neck. It's falling in his face as he inspects whatever was in the tiny black bag, but regardless, Charis can tell from there that he is undoubtedly the most beautiful person Charis has ever seen. The leather jacket and black acid wash jeans that do everything to his legs only make it worse.

The man looks up at him, then runs his eyes down Charis's body.

Immediately Charis is self-conscious. When he'd left the house, he hadn't even thought about his clothes. As is typical of all Sacrosanct, he's dressed entirely in white: white high-top trainers, white dance joggers, slightly sheer, long-sleeved white shirt with a quilted white vest over it, currently most of the way open because it's still relatively warm out. The only things on his person that aren't white are his three titanium rings and the thin platinum chain around his neck, which is halfway under the neck of his shirt anyway.

Worrying about flashing his skin monitor outside the Vizor suddenly seems so stupid. The feeling doubles when a group of people with dust-smeared faces and dark clothes look at Charis with absolute derision, and Charis thinks, for the first time, that he probably made a mistake in coming here.

He breaks the silence between him and the beautiful man first.

"I'm…looking for someone," Charis says, trying to project the certainty and confidence he puts on when he's on stage. "His name is Velkarra. He's—like me. Do you know where he is?"

The man looks Charis up and down again. It feels different this time, and Charis takes half a step back without fully knowing why.

"Sure, Angel. I'll take you to him," the man says as he pockets the small black bag and walks over to Charis. Before Charis can move away any further, he puts an arm across Charis's shoulders and starts leading him in the direction the group of people had come from. Charis matches his pace so he doesn't trip.

There's a flutter of hope in Charis's gut at the fact the man knows where to go. He voices it aloud.

"You know him?"

The man glances up at him. "Of course. He's the main draw, everyone knows him."

The flutter of hope immediately extinguishes.

What the fuck. What the *fuck?* What does that even mean— Charis pushes the man's arm off just as they reach a chain link fence that leads into an industrial corridor that's half open, almost like—

The noise that suddenly comes up from inside whatever is past the fence is like a bomb. Charis flinches instinctively, feeling it in his whole body. The cheering that follows is so loud he fights the urge to cover his ears.

The man smiles a bit, apparently unfazed at having been shrugged off. He points off to the right.

"Down there, make a right. Past the stairs, past the water towers, then down to the end of the hall. He's not on for a while yet, so he should be down there."

Charis smiles over his shoulder. He's already walking away from the man. "Thanks," he fires off before crossing the fence and turning right.

There are a lot more people in the hall. Parts of one side of it are blown away, and through the gaps, Charis can see a *sea* of people in the arena below.

Because that's what it is. An arena. It has to be. He can't see whatever it is people are watching, and he's too determined to find Karra to care about the dirty looks the people he passes are giving him.

He passes an ancient steel forge, long since caked in rust, winding through the supports of several enormous cisterns far above his head before he enters the other side of the corridor. As he gets to the end of the man's directions, though, Charis stops again. The winding corridor he's walked down doesn't let out anywhere, just a dirt hill leading to some kind of giant metal shed.

There aren't any other people on this side. Charis hesitates a beat, then walks up the hill anyway.

The hill doesn't lead anywhere either. The giant shed is enclosed on all sides with another chain link fence, this one at least a head taller than him. There's a ledge of concrete blocks that's just wide enough to walk across, though, and he sees a couple of people jump down what is probably a three-meter drop from where they were sitting onto the ground through a gap in the fence without even shaking it off.

Charis walks balance beam-style to where the two were sitting, crossing the opening of the fence. He doesn't sit down, just crouches and looks out at the arena.

He gets why they were sitting there. Charis can see everything from up here. It's not as big an arena as it had seemed from the gaps in the wall, but it isn't small, either—there are definitely at least a few thousand people down there, more perching on the walls, concrete ledges, and even a couple small groups up on suspended platforms and decommissioned cranes, all watching

the action below. Behind him is a huge metal shed that's entirely empty but for a sloped concrete embankment leading up one end of it and a lot of old industrial rigging along the walls. Charis turns back to the arena.

It's hard to even parse what he's seeing. There's a banked track around almost the entire perimeter. In the center is what looks like a raised stage with a wide walkway around it, separated from the track by a thick wall surrounded on all sides by barrels and other equipment. There are a few people on the stage, people who look important somehow, but no one is watching them.

They're all watching the track.

Charis counts twelve people and ten motorcycles on the track. Actual motorcycles. The kind that aren't made anymore, the kind that have tires and ride on the ground and are powered by gasoline. The bikes are narrow-bodied, the back tires wider than the front, and their riders are wearing something skintight and brightly-colored—easier to see from a distance, harder for the dust to blot out. Half are in neon orange, the other half in a yellowish green so bright it almost hurts to look at.

The remaining two are on hoverboards. *This* tech, Charis knows, and he feels a swoop of adrenaline as one of the two in the air snaps a flat shield open and something silver and spinning ricochets off it and back onto the track.

Someone on the green team is way out in front of everyone else. Another green player catches the silver thing off the track, barely dodging a grappling orange hand as they reach for the object and leaning into the curves of the banked track so far Charis can't believe they don't fall off. Charis hears the silver

thing—is it a ball? A disc? He can't tell from here—snap into a glove, then the rider rips it free and chucks it forward, and the green rider out in front catches it with a jolt just as three of the orange riders surge forward, along with another green rider, the revs of the engine so loud below that Charis winces and claps his hands over his ears.

There's a loud *boom* as another sound cannon goes off. Except it's not a sound cannon, Charis sees the person riding the motorcycle out in front is thrown suddenly over the handlebars, losing the bike as it skids out toward the wall, one of its tires blown to shreds. The bike takes out one of the players in orange before slamming into the wall with a violent, metallic *crunch,* and Charis's breath catches as he waits to see if the person will get up.

No one stops. Not even the two people on hoverboards. There's a flag so dusty Charis can't even tell what color it is, then another person in orange darts out from between the stage and the track. The silver thing is passed a few times, then another engine revs somewhere and suddenly there's an eleventh motorcycle at one corner of the stage—not on top of it, just beside it, and there's a person in *white* getting ready to mount it—

What the fuck. *What the fuck.* Someone down below kisses the white rider before they put their helmet on, then claps them on the back—Charis can't see their face, they're facing the wrong way, but there's *no way*—

"You are *awfully* far from home, young man," comes a sneering voice behind him.

Charis is on his feet so fast he nearly slips off the edge of the wall. He grabs the fence behind him for balance, moving so his back is to it, then turns.

There are at least eight people behind him. Most are dressed similarly, all ripped denim and black leather, many of them tattooed and pierced and with half-shaved heads or complicated braids, or in the case of the woman near the back with an active shock baton at her hip, both. Most of them are armed, some with weapons drawn. Two of them look like they could throw the crashed motorcycle across the track.

Charis locates the speaker. Charis has never seen him before in his life. Which makes no sense, because he's wearing a white button-down under a cream-colored blazer—which means he's Sacrosanct, right? No one else can wear white, and the Sacrosanct on Earth all know each other—one thumb hooked into the pocket of dark jeans, and the other seven are watching him more than Charis. He's at least half a head shorter, with extremely prominent cheekbones and a smile that's doing a bad job of trying not to be a smirk, and there's something so predatory about him that Charis feels the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end.

The man pulls back his left sleeve just enough for Charis to get a glimpse of his skin monitor. There's an active red protocol warning about felonious activity, but the man just makes some kind of gesture over his wrist and the red protocol goes dark. He looks back at Charis and tips his head a bit to the side.

"Do you want to tell me how you found this place or am I going to have to ask Sonja here to give your brain a hard reset?"

He gestures at the woman in the back, the one holding the shock baton, whose smirk *isn't* trying to be anything else. She is the same height and build as Charis while somehow also looking like she could break him in half even without the weapon. Charis shakes his head furiously.

"No, no! I'm—I'm really not doing anything, I'm just trying to find my brother—"

"Two lost kittens walk into a bar," a man somewhere says. Someone huffs a laugh.

The first man, the scary one who is also apparently Sacrosanct, takes a step toward Charis, then another. He's wearing heeled boots that click on the concrete. How the *fuck* had he not heard—

"Let's say I believe you," the man drawls. He's closer than arm's length now. "How concerned should I be that the mainframe knows where you are?"

Not—what? Charis pulls his sleeve back to check his location tracker and the man's hand darts out, his grip vice-like around Charis's cybertronic forearm as he yanks Charis's sleeve back further, opening his logs.

The man scrolls through for a few seconds. His fingers are rough and cold against Charis's skin despite the day's lingering heat. He makes a hum of approval.

"Off-system bypass. So you're not completely stupid." He looks up at Charis and smiles again, dimming the screen on Charis's monitor again without even looking. "One less thing to worry about."

Charis doesn't wait to find out what the man will do next. He lets go of the fence with his other hand and runs his finger along the back of his ear until he hears the private comms link he uses with Karra activate.

"Karra, please help—there's people here and they might kill me, *please,* I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

One of the other seven yanks Charis's hand hard away from his ear and Charis cries out at a sudden, sharp pain in his shoulder that ricochets down his arm. Down in the arena, there's another loud *boom,* then people are screaming—someone lands a boot in Charis's ribs, another an elbow to the back that has him spinning.

Then, there's a commotion. The people scatter like a parting swarm as the angry hum of an engine grows louder and louder.

And louder.

"What the fuck is he doing?!"

"Is he riding *up the stairs—?*"

"Mother*fuck,* get back—"

The deep staccato of the motorcycle's engine echoes around the shed, and less than a second later, a deep red motorcycle skids to a stop in the middle of the group, splitting the two with their hands on Charis from the rest and forcing the people at the back to disperse before the rider, the one in white who Charis had *just seen* enter the track, rips off their helmet and yanks their sleeve up, speaking directly into their skin monitor.

“Rafel, tell them to stand down *right now,*” Karra orders. “Yen, unless you want to lose that hand, let go of my brother *immediately.*”

Yen—?

Before his brain fully registers the familiar name, Charis watches in a daze as the person who had dislocated his shoulder runs back around the bike, rejoining the others. The leader—Yen, apparently—looks Karra deadass in the face and makes a show of dropping Charis’s wrist. The next second, there’s a voice from something on Karra, just loud enough for Charis to hear:

“I will kill him,” whoever is on the line says. *“Take Charis home.”*

CHAPTER TWO

Kat reports to his brother's office that evening like a dutiful soldier. He makes sure to show up thirty minutes late.

As expected, Rafel had started his diatribe early, Kat's tardiness stoking his irritation—which was what Kat wanted, because that meant it would be over with quicker. As it is, Rafel has been yelling for what feels like an hour, and Kat really wants a cigarette.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Kat flicks the cap of his lighter open and closed. Open and closed. Each time he opens it, it ignites. After a few beats of silence, he plucks a long cigarette from behind his ear, holds it in his lips, and lights it, taking a long drag off the stimulant inside it and exhaling the smoke through his nose.

The answer is very obviously *no,* and neither of them needs to point it out. Rafel is angry, and he's blowing smoke—figuratively speaking—but he won't lay a finger on Kat, because he needs Kat. Kat does the dirty work Rafel is too good for. That all of them are too good for, because no one else in his family of criminals can stand getting their hands dirty.

Instead, he locks eyes with Rafel and takes another drag, this time exhaling a long line of white that dissipates between them while neither speak. Kat looks away and flicks his lighter open again.

"That Sacrosanct kid—"

Rafel snatches the cigarette from Kat's lips and extinguishes it on the arm of the chair Kat is sitting in. Kat glares at him. "That '*Sacrosanct kid'* is Karra's brother, and if you touch him again I will gut you and feed you to the vultures."

Kat again holds eye contact as he pulls another cigarette out of his jacket pocket. He rolls them himself, and he glances away only to make a show of inspecting his own handiwork before raising the second cigarette to his lips.

"Aw, I love you too." He lights the end, takes a long drag, and blows the smoke in Rafel's face. Then he stands and starts making for the door. "If that's all, I *pinky promise* not to hurt your wife's little brother."

Rafel's hand is out in a flash, grabbing at Kat's open jacket as he swings at Kat. Kat knew it was coming and dodges easily, spinning on his heel.

No one talks to him as he leaves. A few of the family's inner circle of guards, henchmen, lackeys, whatever they are watch him go, Eris from where she's standing in front of an entire wall of monitors and Mako from where he's sitting on the couch, rolling his legs out with a stick covered in rolling beads meant to work out knots.

Kat ignores them otherwise, making directly for the garage. A couple of racers from the bout are huddled around the bike that wrecked, and Kat can tell just from a glance that the bike is a lost cause unless they're prepared to rebuild it from the ground up. Or ask him to fix it.

He levers through the open driver's side window of his crawler and pulls out without a word.

Kat makes for the city. His crawler is one of the only four-wheeled vehicles in their family's possession that can make it out of the underground garage unassisted, its split axles and deep treads making easy work of the boulders and gullies surrounding the compound. It's only a few hundred meters before the ground flattens out, but the concentration of navigating the rocks in the dying dusk light helps Kat clear his head.

Kat had neither known nor cared who the Sacrosanct kid who'd wandered into the Boneyard was when he'd first seen him. He was an easy mark, yes, but that wasn't the problem—the problem was, a Sacrosanct still linked to the mainframe was all but a beacon for the mainframe, and he couldn't be there. And when Charis had gotten closer, close enough for Kat to see who he was, it had been an obvious and simple move to call Yen, their family enforcer, in to handle it: Yen is also Sacrosanct, after all, and second to none at dealing with problems like this without alerting any authorities who might make trouble for the family about it. It's why he's their enforcer.

So Kat had miscalculated. Whatever. It was Karra, not him, who insisted that his brother not be brought close to their family's activities.

He knows who Charis is, of course. Everyone does. But like everyone else, he knows Charis—or *Velcharis,* to use his full, pretentious Sacrosanct name—mostly as a multiplatinum pop artist, actor, and model, and he hadn't been done up to look the part of a celebrity the way he usually was. It had been, and still is, frankly astonishing to Kat that the artist known as Velashay would even *think* of going anywhere, especially the

Boneyard, without an entire retinue of guards, but Karra *has* long complained that his brother lacks situational awareness.

Kat audibly huffs a laugh as he pulls into the far outskirts of the city, where the first thing he sees, aside from the buildings and storefronts long since abandoned to the desert, is a sun-faded, poorly-lit billboard with Charis's face on it displayed over a couple of rooftops, smiling and holding some product that the weather and the amateur pink graffiti tag over it have rendered unidentifiable.

He's younger in that photo, Kat thinks as he passes around the outer markets. The markets, which are closed at this hour, are pedestrian-only, but there's a dusty road that winds around this end of them on both sides, and Kat passes down almost the entire length of it before making a left down a narrower road that leads to the warehouse district.

When he reaches the rusted metal door he's looking for, Kat parks his crawler and gets out, using the door this time, and lights a cigarette, holding the stick in his lips and taking a drag as he unlocks the padlock at ground level. He grabs the handle and lifts it.

Inside, sitting on several cellophaned crates of the same dry stimulant between his lips, is none other than Velcharis himself. On either side of him are five masked guards dressed head to toe in white, albeit with black bands at every joint marking them as Insignis, the highest class of people born natively on Earth.

Kat takes a long drag, then snuffs out his cigarette against the bottom of his shoe and lets it fall to the floor of the warehouse.

Then he claps, punctuating his steps with applause as he walks further inside.

In eerie unison, Charis's guards raise their guns. Kat holds up a hand to quiet them as though they answer to him rather than Charis.

"Good job, Angel. That was even faster than me."

Charis taps his heel against the wrapped stacks.

"Those will kill you, you know."

As he'd done with Rafel, Kat takes another one out of his pocket, locks eyes with Charis, and lights it, this time with a flourish. He could do this all day.

The problem is, Charis also looks like he could do this all day, and Kat didn't spend the last half hour before coming into town getting reamed by Rafel only to have this privileged brat repeat that treatment. Kat has less than zero interest in dragging this out any longer than he needs to.

"What do you want?" Kat asks after a drag.

Charis glares at him. "The second eye," he answers, projecting his voice.

Several long beats of silence pass between them. Kat takes another drag, then swears under his breath.

Of *course* he invokes the class right. The right of the second eye is something akin to reparations or amends when a member of the lower classes insults or harms a Sacrosanct. Failure to comply with an invocation of the second eye results in the

bearer's life becoming increasingly more difficult until they do: interrupted business, impossible travel, or, in rare cases, the disappearance of a loved one. The mainframe has neither empathy nor a moral compass.

"Again, what do you want?"

The tapping of Charis's heel against the stacks doubles in tempo for a moment before stilling.

Then he laughs. There's no humor in it.

"I know you probably think I'm a privileged brat," he begins, not answering the question, and Kat restrains himself from flinching at the eerie echo of his own thoughts. "This might surprise you, but I've never invoked the class right before."

"Why start now?" Kat asks after another drag.

Charis levels another glare at him. He looks a little bit like an angry kitten, and also a little bit like he's bitten into a lemon.

"Velkarra. I want him out."

This time Kat audibly laughs. "You *really* don't understand, Angel."

Charis hops down off the stack. It's nearly a two-meter drop, and Kat passingly wonders how Charis got up there before he watches him drop to the floor with a grunt, rolling out his ankles as he stands. He straightens again.

"I do, actually. I want him out. I don't want him involved with your family."

A perfectly reasonable way to feel about his brother's involvement with one of the region's most powerful crime families, Kat thinks. And there's no doubt in Kat's mind that Charis knows who they are, given he was able to not only find but break into one of his family's warehouses as quickly as he had. Catha isn't illegal, though it *is* somewhat hard to get—a stimulant made from the stems and roots of a medicinal plant that shares its name, with similar effects to tobacco but which consumes a fraction of the water and soil nutrients—but there are plenty of things his family deals in that *are* illegal, including some contents of this warehouse. Charis has probably figured that out too.

Kat responds without missing a beat.

"Is this because of your parents?"

Charis flinches at this. The corner of Kat's mouth flicks up, a glimmer of a smirk.

Yet another thing the entire world knows about Charis is that Charis's parents were assassinated a number of years ago. It was shortly before his debut as an artist, and it was thought to have been politically motivated, though the killer has never been found. The jab having done its work, though, Kat doesn't linger. He takes another drag.

"It's never going to happen. They're disgustingly in love. But if you're that worried, I can help you another way."

Another beat. "What is it?" Charis eventually asks.

"I don't work for free," Kat answers.

This is pushing it, Kat thinks. The second eye is a punishment—the bearer is not meant to profit off of it. There are decent odds, though, that Charis doesn't know that, since he's never invoked it before, and he doesn't seem like the type to go researching the dynamics of reparations for fun. Access to the mainframe's basically infinite knowledge bank notwithstanding, Sacrosancts still have to look for whatever it is they want to know.

"What do you want, then? I can pay you."

Kat looks Charis up and down. As at Old Forge yesterday, he is dressed entirely in white—this time a white so bright it's almost luminescent in the dim light of the warehouse. Tapered white pants tucked into white patent leather, nearly knee-length boots, white bomber jacket and scarf over what looks to be a tight-fitting tank top, based on the glimpse of shoulder Kat noticed as Charis dropped down off the stacks.

He can't deny that Charis is nice to look at. He's tall and lean, his short hair something Kat imagines his brother Ariel might call *artfully tousled,* dark eyes half-lined in darker eyeliner, lips slightly shining. This time, he *does* look like a celebrity. Kat glances at the floor before taking another drag.

"I don't doubt that," Kat answers.

This is going to be delicate. Whatever Kat asks for, it has to be something that won't get in the way of Charis's demand under the second eye. If the mainframe catches wind of Kat trying to sabotage it, the consequences will be far worse than if he'd simply failed to comply.

"Tell me, then. What can you do that will get my brother out?"

Nowhere has Kat read that compliance with the second eye demands that the invoker know the truth of whether their request will produce their desired result. It isn't the result, after all, that the class right requires. The whole point of it is compliance.

There's really only one thing he wants. *Good thing it's something Charis is uniquely equipped to give me*, Kat thinks, fighting a smirk. With one more pull, Kat drops his second cigarette on the warehouse floor and steps on the burning end.

"You can get into Arkana, can't you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Charis arrived back from the warehouse in a fugue.

It's fortunate for him that Karra knows how to reset dislocated shoulders. Since skin monitors can heal wounds and diseases, his side had been fine by the time they'd gotten home. But there are some kinds of injuries that are above a monitor's pay grade, and a dull ache in his shoulder that he still feels now, hours later, is among his only concrete reminders that the past twelve hours or so really happened.

He doesn't even know how to *think* about unpacking what had happened this evening. Unsurprisingly, after helping Charis with his shoulder, the first thing Karra had done when they'd made it back to their house in the Vizor was yell at him. Karra isn't good at staying mad for long, though, and when he'd seen Charis's face, seen how his frustration at Charis for going to the Boneyard alone and putting himself in danger was blowing over Charis like wind, Charis had seen the frustration fall instantly.

Karra had gone into caretaker mode, then, bundling Charis in a blanket even though it wasn't cold and ushering him to the couch, where he sat down next to Charis, yet far enough away that he could just stare at his brother for what felt like an hour. Maybe it was. It had been hard to look at Karra, but easy to imagine the concern on his face. The guilt he'd been feeling over the whole thing redoubled.

"Can you tell me how you even found it?"

Charis knew Karra had been asking about Old Forge, the arena in the Boneyard where everything had gone down earlier that afternoon. He hadn't looked at Karra when he'd responded.

"I followed you."

"*What—?!*"

Charis cut him off. "How did you think? You turn off your location tracker when you disappear. I have no idea where you go. If you don't send me messages, I don't know if you're even alive."

"Chay," Karra said, a half-whisper.

For some reason, his brother's use of the diminutive of his name suddenly made Charis's worry pivot to acute frustration.

"No." Charis had turned to his brother, feeling progressively angrier and angrier as the beats of silence fell between them. "No, Karra, you don't get to do this. I knew you were involved with something bad when you stopped telling me where you were going and then disappearing for days on end. Do you know how I found you? It was *luck.* I saw a message on your monitor. You should really encrypt those, by the way."

"They are," Karra answered.

He'd looked stricken. His voice was even quieter. For a second, Charis had felt guilty over having put that look on his brother's face, then he'd remembered that Karra really, *really* didn't have a leg to stand on right then. The anger Charis had been feeling quickly took over again.

"*See?!* This is exactly what I mean! Do you have *any* idea how much I worry about you?! All the time, Karra—I can't turn it off. *Obviously* I looked that place up."

"Charis, please. That world is dangerous."

"*I know!*" Charis shouted as he shot to his feet, still holding the blanket around his shoulders. "I know, Karra. I—"

Charis cut himself off, closing his mouth with an audible *click.*

The idea of how to solve this whole thing had come to him, then. Charis turned to the window so Karra wouldn't see his face as he made an excuse.

"I don't want to talk about it. If we talk about it we're just going to fight, and I'm tired."

"Chay—"

Charis snapped his head in his brother's direction, the glare on his face entirely too real, and he held his brother's eyes as he stood up off the couch and let the blanket fall to the floor.

"I'm going upstairs. I want a bath."

And then he'd left. He really had drawn a bath, though he'd dialed up the sensitivity in his ears as he'd let the tub fill, standing by the closed door of his bedroom as he listened for the sounds of Karra moving around the house. Predictably, he'd heard the garage door click open and shut less than ten minutes later, and by the time Charis slipped into the water, the house was silent.

He'd taken his time, doing some background research on a holoscreen he trawled through at eye level, rubbing a lotion made from medicinal salts into his reset shoulder while he read up on the Boneyard and the city's local gangs. When he was done, he'd dressed quickly, not sure how long Karra would be gone—and he'd had a criminal to confront.

Karra had been home when Charis arrived back, once again covered in dust. Rather than judgment, his brother had just given him a long, sad look from across the kitchen island where he was cooking something the kitchen could have easily prepared for him, which was all Charis needed to know that his brother was sorry even though he hadn't apologized.

He *could* have told his brother he'd invoked his class right. The look on Karra's face when he told him he'd invoked it on Karra's behalf would have been satisfying as hell, honestly. But no, two could play at this game. Charis could keep secrets too.

"I'm going to bed," Charis announced.

Then he'd marched off to his bedroom without a second glance.

That had been hours ago. Now, it's well into the early morning hours and Charis hasn't slept a wink. Instead, he's turned on his ceiling fan, watching the huge blades sweep across the ceiling as he lays in his enormous bed and rethinks his life.

The answer to the beautiful man's question in the warehouse earlier that evening is yes. Yes, he can go to Arkana. He could go right now if he wanted to. Not even because he's a celebrity, either—a few taps on his skin monitor and there would be an off-world transport at his front door in minutes.

But Charis hates Arkana. The vast majority of Sacrosanct live on Arkana, a spaceship in low-Earth orbit that was built over a thousand years ago by survivors of the first nuclear winter. To avoid the messy problem of international governance, it was built around a supercomputer: an AI that urban legends say was originally named G.O.D., Generator of Data, whose prime directive is to keep humanity alive.

And it has done a good job. As all Sacrosanct children learn in elementary school, to help the mainframe identify who it was supposed to protect, the original crew of Arkana had designed a hereditary blood tag that helped it keep track of them—and they'd made it recessive, meaning a child under the mainframe's protection could only be born to two people already under its protection. The skin monitors that gave these Sacrosanct access to the mainframe's vast knowledge came later. For the first couple of centuries after Arkana was built, when the Earth's surface was largely uninhabitable and no one was coming or going from it, the blood tag was common sense.

In theory, the mainframe and its human charges have a synergistic relationship. The mainframe designs an optimal world, continually adjusting things based on whatever it decides its people need, and its people just live in it, repairing the ship from time to time and managing the resources the mainframe decides are necessary to help it obey its prime directive. People live and die, the ship orbits the Earth, and somehow, the number of Sacrosanct never changes.

The ship is dozens of kilometers across at its widest point, big enough that there are parts of it that are forests full of trees grown taller than houses, even though it never rains. There is water pumped through the floor that keeps the plants alive.

The plants keep the air clean, and some of them serve as food sources. There are no animals, but there are houses the same size as Karra and Charis's in the Vizor, houses with running water and swimming pools and showers big enough for two families to stand in comfortably. No dust *anywhere,* not even in the hangars in the outer ring where the more rugged off-planet transports are kept. No grime, no disease—there's barely even *death,* considering how long the mainframe can keep people alive.

It's beautiful, and it's fake.

Charis has hated it ever since his parents died. There's a part of him that wouldn't be surprised to learn it was *why* they died. There's nothing natural about Arkana—and now that Arkana's residents *do* come and go from the Earth's surface, it's far, far too easy for people up there to forget they were not the only survivors of the first apocalypse.

Or the two that had come after, for that matter.

Which makes the beautiful man's request so interesting. The beautiful man is Michal Scaramandis: Insignis, based on his surname, though he's so out of compliance with class regulations it's a wonder he hasn't been reclassified. At 25, he is, as Charis had originally guessed, roughly the same age as Karra—though in the last photo Charis had been able to find of him, from his final year of high school, he's even younger than Charis is now.

But that's not the most interesting thing. The *most* interesting thing is that there are Scaramandises who are Sacrosanct, and Michal is not one of them.

But Charis knows two who are. In a manner of speaking, anyway, since Sacrosanct names and surnames are derived from the sectors of Arkana where they are born, the 88 of which are named after constellations. Scaramandis is not among these, but it is a new enough name in the Insignis registry that it had given Charis pause when he'd looked it up.

And then it had given him even more pause. There were two names listed with it that shouldn't have been. One of the two is his best friend; the other is the person who had tried to kill him in the Boneyard only a few hours ago, who is apparently his best friend's older brother.

Yen had been Charis's first clue. Ariyen Aurivanus Herculantia, also around Karra's age, though a year older rather than younger, which Charis already knew from having been friends with his brother Arileon since grade school. Yen hadn't been around much after the first couple of years, and he and Leon aren't close the way Charis and Karra are, so Charis had always chalked his absence up to the age difference between him and Leon and left it at that.

Charis's first question to Leon was a confirmation of the lie he'd been told about where Yen has been all these years.

—Isn't your brother an engineer on Arkana?

Leon hadn't answered immediately. When he did, it was a string of question marks.

—?????

It had been tempting to send Leon a recording from his memory bank of Yen threatening him in the Boneyard. So that's

exactly what he did, and Leon had called him less than ten seconds later, his voice thick with panic.

"Charis, please stop looking. I want to tell you more but I'm literally not allowed to—"

"What is that supposed to mean?! Why the fuck is he even *on Earth,* let alone in Scaramandis territory—"

Leon interrupted him mid-stream.

"Who else was there? Actually wait, don't tell me, write me on the line I gave you—"

Charis was so angry he'd hung up on Leon—a mistake, at least temporarily, as it had taken Charis several times longer to find what he'd found next on his own than it would have if he'd just asked Leon about it—now that he knew Leon had been lying to him for nearly a decade. Still, finding answers had been almost as simple as retracing his steps on the off-system for how he'd learned about Old Forge, now that he had something to look for.

The Scaramandis family is one of the city's more powerful crime families, positioned as it is because it's led by a rogue Sacrosanct, one rumored to have found a way to render himself undetectable to the mainframe without having to disconnect from it. But because of the way Arkanene names work, that's all anyone has ever been able to find out about him. In order to scrub any connection to Arkana from his earthly empire, he'd adopted a family name rather than a sector name when he went dark.

There's more to it, though, and a look back through his own memories has gotten Charis much further than anything he's found on the off-system. The Boneyard is Scaramandis territory, after all, far from where most Sacrosancts on Earth are known to tread—and Leon knows it like the back of his hand.

Charis has so many questions. He has so many questions it's overwhelming to think about them all, and he's so tired after everything that happened that the only thing he can do is stare at the ceiling and simmer in the knowledge that every important living relationship he has is a lie.

Being angry with Karra had used up all of his ire for the day, though. So instead, Charis rolls onto his right side and tugs up his sleeve and looks unseeingly at his skin monitor, dimmed now because it's idle.

He wakes it up, pulls open a search bar. Closes it again. Where does he even start? He doesn't want to talk to Leon yet, because talking to Leon will make him angry again and he's too tired for that right now.

After a few more minutes of staring at his illuminated skin monitor, Charis sits up with a grunt and scoots off the bed, making his way to the door.

He cracks the handle. The hall outside is dark but for the moonlight pouring in through the huge windows lining the whole southern wall. But the hinges are silent as Charis opens the door enough to slip out, then pauses.

For a moment, he just listens. The house is quiet, though not silent. There's still air circulating through the vents, still water

gurgling down the artificial waterfall by the front door. But there's no light coming through the gap between Karra's closed door and the carpet.

Charis picks his way down the hall as quietly as he can. Karra is a heavy sleeper, if he's even still here. But Charis does similarly with the door anyway, turning the handle in tiny increments so that the metal doesn't scrape against itself and pushing it open with all the caution of a burglar cracking a safe. When it's open, he runs his fingers quickly across his closed eyelids, switching his vision to night mode.

Karra is there. For a moment, Charis is surprised. The part of him that's used to Karra leaving with no warning half expected Karra to have gone back to his boyfriend. Even though he's by no means done being mad at Karra, Charis feels a little ripple of satisfaction at the fact Karra chose him tonight. As quickly as it appears, though, it's gone again, replaced with a feeling of obscure hollowness at how empty his brother's room feels, even with Karra currently in it.

Charis shakes it off with a shrug and pads closer to his brother, keeping as silent as he can. Thanks to his dance training, it's pretty damn silent. Karra is not an elegant sleeper—he's facing Charis on his side, face half-tucked into the pillow that one arm is half-buried under, the other bent a bit haphazard at his side.

It's that one that Charis needs. Carefully, he lowers himself to a squat and lifts Karra's left arm.

Karra doesn't move. Charis glances at his face—still asleep. He stays asleep while Charis turns his wrist enough to be able to see the face of his skin monitor.

Charis wakes it from idle, positioning his body to block as much of the light as he can while otherwise avoiding touching his brother. As Charis unlocks it using his family bypass, he feels Karra try to tug his arm free and pauses, chancing a glance at his face—Karra makes a little sound of protest, but instead of waking, he buries his face further into the pillow.

Charis waits for his breathing to even out again before he continues. Once it does, he pulls up Karra's contacts directory.

He's not sure what he expected. There are a few names he recognizes—neighbors, friends of their parents, Charis's own agent and manager—but the vast majority, he doesn't know, especially as most are only listed by nickname.

Charis pauses before tapping on Michal. He's listed as Kat, but unlike most of the others, Kat's card includes his surname. A couple below Kat is someone named Rafel—before he'd threatened Leon's brother, Charis remembers Karra addressing someone by the name Rafel through his monitor. He files that knowledge away for later.

With a few taps, he copies Kat's contact information to his own monitor, then makes to dim Karra's again.

With another sound of protest, Karra rolls over in his sleep, taking Charis's arm with him.

Charis catches himself on the edge of the bed with his other hand, his heartbeat quickly spiking before he remembers to modulate his breathing. Karra must think Charis is Rafel—which would be funny if this whole situation weren't basically Karra's mystery boyfriend's fault, a thought that makes Charis have to fight to keep himself from yanking his arm free. Instead, he

inhales deeply, then very, very slowly begins pulling his arm out of Karra's grip.

Karra whines and gropes at the air with his other hand, but he doesn't wake.

Not wanting to push his luck once his arm is free, Charis yanks his sleeve down and tiptoes out of Karra's room again, closing the door agonizingly slowly before booking it back to his own room as quickly as he can. Once he's on the other side of the door, he pulls his sleeve up again and looks at the contact he just stole.

There's something weird about seeing it there. Seeing the contact card on his own monitor makes it more real somehow. There's nothing strange about the data on it—the number Charis is looking at has the same number of digits as any Insignis contact code. But this whole evening still doesn't feel real, and somehow seeing the number on Karra's monitor hadn't made Kat into a real human in Charis's mind. He still felt like part of a bad dream.

With a sigh, Charis steps away from the door, making for his desk. He grabs the black box Leon had given him for his birthday, which they use to send secret messages to each other that the mainframe can't read—a *disintegrating line,* he'd called it. Charis has no idea how it works.

Before Charis can talk himself out of it, he fires off a message to Kat.

—*Why do you want to get into Arkana?*

There's no response. He sets the box down again when he remembers that it's nearly three in the morning, so of course there's no response.

Almost as soon as he puts the box down, though, it opens with a message suspended in flickering orange text between two tiny pillars, visible just long enough for Charis to read it before it disappears.

—You're awfully brave to put a claim like that in writing where anyone can find it.

Charis rolls his eyes, even though Kat can't see him. Of course Kat is the type who would keep weird hours. Charis isn't sure whether he's relieved or annoyed.

—This is a disintegrating line

After a couple of beats, he adds:

—Again. Why do you want to get into Arkana?

There's no response. A few minutes pass, during which time Charis realizes how hungry he is. Just as he's about to leave to go to the kitchen, though, he fires off one last message.

—I'm not going to help you unless you tell me

Kat answers nearly immediately.

—I want to know where the smoke is coming from.

This throws Charis for a loop.

—?????

A beat later, two more messages come in:

—Meet me at the location I'm about to send you. Tomorrow, 1400. Come alone.

Then an address. Quickly, before the message disappears, Charis fumbles around on his desk until he finds a blank notescreen and scribbles it down.

Then he goes downstairs as his hunger makes itself known, missing the message from Leon that comes in on the box:

—Please be careful around my cousins, Charis. I'm so sorry.

CHAPTER FOUR

At 1400 on the dot, Charis appears in the doorway of a white wingback transport. The craft hovers a few meters in the air as a staircase descends gracefully to the ground. Charis is walking down it before it finishes lowering, hands in the pockets of his bomber jacket, looking around at where they are.

“There’s nothing here,” he says.

Kat watches the ladder retract, the door close, and the craft pivot in the air and make for the city again before he answers.

“It’s a real address.”

“Obviously. The transport found it,” Charis quips back.

“Do you know what used to be here?”

Charis shakes his head. Kat feels the corner of his mouth quirk up. “Neither do I,” he says, and starts walking to his crawler.

Kat hears a sputtering noise behind him, then what sounds vaguely like a curse before Charis follows him. Charis has to jog a bit to catch up, but he’s just a hair taller than Kat and catches up easily. “Where are we going?”

Kat doesn’t answer, just walks around to the passenger side door and unlatches the three-part mechanism, then holds the door for Charis. Charis looks at him over the rim of his aviator sunglasses before grabbing the handle at ceiling height and climbing into the crawler.

“Why are you being nice?”

Once Charis is seated, Kat closes the door and goes around to the driver's side, turning the key before he looks at Charis over the center console.

"Does anyone know where you are?"

Charis is bent forward, feeling around for the bar under his seat so he can move the chair back to accommodate his long legs. His sunglasses are pale enough that Kat can see him roll his eyes even though he's facing forward. "Of course they do," he says, pushing the chair back. "You just said to come alone."

Kat huffs a laugh and puts the car into drive. He hears rather than sees Charis fumble around for the seatbelt.

"It's a harness," Kat supplies.

"Why?"

He glances at Charis again, flashing a grin. "You'll see in a few minutes."

"Secretive," Charis mumbles, but straps in anyway.

They drive in silence for several long minutes, the only sounds coming from outside as the crawler's thick treads consume sand and rock beneath them on the plateau. Another glance at Charis finds him turned almost fully toward the window, long fingers curled over the sill, looking out at the empty desert as though he's seeing it for the first time.

Maybe he is, Kat thinks. He has no idea how long Charis has spent on Earth.

“I’ve never been in a car with wheels before,” he says after another minute or so, once again voicing an answer to Kat’s thoughts as though he can read them, like he had in the warehouse. This time it’s even more unsettling. “It’s different.”

“How so?”

Charis glances at Kat with a grin. “Slower,” he answers.

Without a word, Kat throws the crawler into fourth gear and steps on the gas. Charis makes a surprised yelp and clutches at the handle on the door as he’s thrown back into the chair.

“Asshole.”

Kat smirks and keeps driving.

After another ten minutes or so, Kat slows. They pass into the Iron Ghosts, a sparse forest of long-dead trees, weaving around and through, kicking up enough dust that the silhouettes of the trees in the rearview mirrors bring to mind how they got their names. Their trunks are all that’s left of them, splintered off at the tops and worn smooth on the outside thanks to hundreds of years of being pummeled by desert sandstorms. Once upon a time, some of these trees had been hundreds of feet tall.

There’s nothing left of the forest’s understory. He can see the edge of the plateau through the hazy air.

He does not slow further.

“Kat,” Charis says.

The sound of his name out of Charis’s mouth sends a jolt of surprise through him, one that curls in the base of his gut like a

satisfied animal. It throws him off enough that he almost has to shake his head to clear it.

"Kat," Charis says again, louder this time, more urgent. "That's a *cliff,* can this thing fly—?!"

Kat doesn't answer. A few dozen meters from the edge, Kat banks a hard right and quickly downshifts into second, letting the crawler's extra momentum bleed out as they hug the edge of the cliff until it's no longer a sheer drop down, just rolling waves of packed dust interspersed with piles of huge boulders. Kat turns into it and brakes, smoothly easing the crawler down the slope.

When Kat doesn't stop as they come upon the first cluster of boulders, Kat hears Charis's grip on the door handle tighten.

"What the fuck," Charis hisses under his breath, just as the crawler's wheels lock onto the first of the rocks and ease down, gentle as a first kiss.

Kat makes easy work of the first field, leaning into curves and crevasses as the crawler's split axles hug sandstone boulders sometimes twice or even three times its size. The boulders in this field are positioned like fallen dominoes, and Kat lets gravity do most of the work of propelling the crawler forward as he steers over and around them, the crawler's engine purring with satisfaction as they go. Kat can't glance at him right now, but he can see in his peripheral vision that Charis has switched his grip from the door handle to the ceiling handle. His other fingers are white-knuckled around a corner of the center console.

"Relax," Kat says. "We're not going to flip."

Charis doesn't answer, and he doesn't relax his grip, either. As they approach the last boulder, Kat throws an arm around the back of Charis's headrest.

"Kat, *please*—"

Something hot shoots down Kat's body at that urgent tone.

"I know what I'm doing, Angel."

And then they're through. The crawler glides down the slope, and Charis relaxes into his seat, lowering his hand from the ceiling handle.

It flies back to the door as they approach the second field. Kat suppresses a laugh.

The second field is wider and flatter than the first, closer to the canyon floor as it is, the rocks volcanic and dark, most far smaller than the ones in the first field. The crawler makes easy work of them, too, but it's a rougher ride, since they can't lean into the turns as much. At one point he glimpses Charis bracing himself between the center console and the door and wonders briefly if he's feeling sick.

"You okay?"

"I hate wheeled transports," Charis grumbles in response.

Kat laughs quietly at this and pulls his hand back to the gearshift.

Some time later, once they've cleared a third field and crossed a dry creek bed, Kat pulls off, coasting along to where the canyon opens up into a second, *much* steeper drop and

stopping just beside the cliff face in the shadow of a rocky outcrop. On the ledge above, a single, defiant scrub pine clings to the edge, its short needles splayed into nothingness, as though it's trying to catch the sun before it falls hundreds of meters down to the canyon floor below. He puts the crawler in park, pulling the e-brake for good measure before opening the driver's-side door and shaking his legs a bit, then jumping out. He hears Charis do likewise, unstrapping and fumbling with the door a bit before he figures out the mechanism.

Kat walks until he's a couple of meters from the edge of the cliff, then stops. Charis joins him. Kat nods with his chin.

"Over there," he says, and pulls out a cigarette.

In the distance, probably dozens of kilometers away, a finger of dark smoke curls up into the sky.

The smoke had appeared a few months ago. The first time Kat had seen it, he hadn't been nearly this close—he'd been at the edge of the plateau on Leon's dirtbike, testing a few modifications to the suspension that his cousin had asked for. He'd been alone. There had been a lot more of it that day: dark, angry clouds of it puffing up into the sky until they were high enough to be scattered by the wind.

The first thing he'd thought was fire. But that was impossible—there isn't anything combustible *left* anywhere close to them. The second nuclear winter had seen to that, a three-hundred-year iceless ice age brought about when earthbound survivors of the first nuclear winter had tried to reverse its effects with terraforming technology. The result had been meltdowns so catastrophic that almost no life on the surface of this part of the world had survived.

Whatever was causing the smoke was a mystery. There were no reports of it anywhere in any Earth systems, and the one time he'd searched the Arkana mainframe—using Leon's skin monitor, Kat's payment for fixing his dirtbike—he'd been rerouted in loops, the results continually coming back to internet encyclopedia-type pages about the formation of the Iron Ghosts or the geology of the canyon. There were no photos of the smoke, and the one time Kat had taken them, his camera had disappeared the next day, reappearing in the garage three days later with those photos mysteriously missing.

He needs film. He needs analog tech, something no computer could mess with. And he needs to get closer, but every time he's tried to do it by air, the aircraft's controls would fritz and stop working. Once, the engines had threatened to shut off mid-flight until he'd quickly steered back the way he'd come, and he'd landed the plane with shaking hands barely a couple of meters from the edge of the plateau, his heart galloping with adrenaline over how close he'd come to crashing it into the cliff.

"What is it?" Charis asks after a couple of minutes.

"I don't know," Kat answers honestly.

But Charis is already moving. He walks along the edge of the cliff, barely an arm's breadth from the drop. The little mouth of it Kat has driven them into is framed between two rocky outcroppings perhaps fifty meters apart, and after a couple of drags, he watches Charis reach the second and stop, hands on his hips, just staring at the rock face for a few seconds.

Then he grabs the wall and starts climbing.

Kat throws his cigarette to the ground. “Charis—”

Charis is perhaps a meter off the ground, holding the rock face one-handed as he glowers at Kat over his shoulder. He hasn’t even taken his sunglasses off.

“I do all of my own stunts, Michal. It’s fine.”

Then he turns back to the wall and keeps climbing.

Well, Kat thinks, definitely *not* blanching at Charis’s use of his first name. *This explains how he’d gotten onto the stacks in the warehouse.* Evidently he’s underestimated Charis.

It’s not that high of a rock face—only a few meters high, with perhaps twice Charis’s height remaining to the top from where he stands now. But it’s high enough to be difficult to see around. Charis’s thinking makes sense, and he makes quick work of the wall, sticking his hands into vertical fissures and finding footholds Kat can’t even see.

He has *definitely* underestimated Charis, Kat thinks with a measure of satisfaction. It also doesn’t hurt that his ass looks fantastic as he climbs.

“Whoa,” Charis says as he clears the top.

He’s paused there, one hand and one foot still jammed into a fissure in a way that can’t be comfortable. Kat sees him look down at the lip of rock for a second before planting both hands on the top, and Kat holds his breath as Charis frees his foot and then—

—hops easily to the top, hooking a knee over and then levering up the rest of the way until he's on his knees with his back to Kat, looking out into the wide canyon below.

Kat lets out a breath. A couple of beats later, Kat's communicator vibrates twice at his hip.

He pulls it out. There's a message from a number he doesn't recognize, but which is obviously Charis, considering the thumbnail image on the screen is very clearly the view of the canyon from where Charis is sitting. Kat opens the message.

And blinks. Even on the small screen, the image is so sharp it's as though Kat is seeing it with his own eyes. Sometimes he forgets just how cyborg Sacrosancts really are.

—This is what I see

The line of text comes in in the next blink, telling Kat what he already knows. A second one follows.

—Want to come up?

"I'm good down here, Angel."

Charis looks down at him with a wide grin, no sunglasses this time. "Your loss, Kat."

Once again, that satisfied animal circles around in his gut before laying back down. Charis doesn't need to know the truth, that ever since his near-wreck on the plateau, Kat and heights have not agreed with each other.

Charis sends him a few more images. Most of them are zoomed in, increasingly lower-quality the closer he gets. But Charis is

seeing *so* much more than he can—including, in the last couple of images, what clearly appears to be some kind of fence at ground level near where the smoke is emerging from.

He hears Charis drop to the ground beside him before he's done scrutinizing that image.

"It's coming from underground," he says. "Maybe eighty or a hundred kilometers from here. I can't tell how deep it is, only that the smoke column is the same size at the base as around here, meaning it can't be originating from ground level."

Charis has gotten close, close enough to tap the screen as he describes what he saw. He smells *very* nice, Kat realizes—clean, bright, a little like spice and herbs, just the barest hint of sweat from exertion. His hair isn't just tousled, it's curly, and there's a second scent there from whatever he uses to tame it.

Charis is still talking, describing some of the things he noticed that couldn't be conveyed in text or images. Kat is listening without really hearing.

"Kat?"

"Hm?"

Charis is looking at him, his eyes sparkling with amusement even as he bites the inside of his lip trying to keep a grin at bay. Kat can see where his teeth are pulling at it.

"We should get back, right? I figure you'll want to write this up somewhere—"

And then Charis is ripped from his side as a series of loud yells sound out behind them.

Kat doesn't blink. In the same fluid move, he pockets his communicator and whirls around, hand already at the curved blade he wears at his hip.

He counts seven of them, including the one with a knife at Charis's throat. Desert marauders, perfectly camouflaged against the dust and rocks and nearly silent in their movements. Kat can't see their faces, only their eyes—slightly reddish thanks to the catha they chew rather than smoke to keep them awake for days on end when hunting for resources. Charis is clutching at the wrist of the one with their blade at his neck.

"Hands off," Kat warns.

The person doesn't respond except to dig the blade into Charis's skin just enough to draw blood. Charis's eyes go wide.

"Kat, behind you—!"

Kat ducks down just as a blade whizzes over his head, knocking the person's knees out from under them before they can recover from the miss. A second has swung at him in the time it took the first to hit the ground—Kat grabs their wrist and twists their arm back until their shoulder dislocates, then shoves them into the person on the ground.

"Well then," he says, and draws his knife.

Two more come at him simultaneously. He hears a woman shout from one before something sharp makes contact with his

leg—not deep, but it stings like a bitch and has blood immediately welling up from where the hooked weapon the woman is carrying has sliced through his jeans. He sees her eyes flash and then narrow, then widen again as Kat drives his blade into the second attacker's gut almost to the hilt without even looking, feeling the person's choked gasp and seizing muscles as he drives the blade up before pulling it free.

They drop down instantly, dead.

"Felumayaal—!"

The woman in front of him shouts, apparently conflicted for a second about whether to make for him or for the person he just dropped. As she surges forward, Kat brings his blade up and across her throat, then whirls around again, smoothly switching hands and driving it into the chest of one of the first two who'd made it back to their feet.

"I said, hands *off,*" Kat growls.

Another one is moving for him. A man, probably a full head taller than him, and Kat isn't short. He's thrown his hood back, revealing long braids and dark skin and tattoos over his face and neck. He's long-limbed and *fast,* fast enough that Kat can't quite dodge the blade aimed at his side.

Kat swears under his breath, staggering a moment until he hears his name again. Somehow that reinvigorates him. As the sixth attacker makes for Kat, he fakes left as the tall man swings again, missing Kat.

The blade lands in the other marauder's neck.

As though in slow motion, Kat sees the tall man accidentally slay his companion, then whirl back around to Kat with an enraged, grieving cry. Kat grits his teeth against the pain in his leg and side and dodges the swing, aiming his own blade up so he cuts across the underside of the marauder's dominant arm. He drops his weapon, grappling instead for Kat's knife. Kat lets the man get his fingers on the hilt around Kat's hand, but before the man can close his grip, Kat drives the blade under his own arm and into the man's side, past his ribcage.

It was a good hit. He got lucky. For a split second, he swears he feels the man's heart around the blade before he pulls it free and spins just enough to throw it into the chest of first man he'd dropped, the one still on the ground, apparently trying to load a sedative dart into a tube. He's too slow.

There's one left. The one still with a blade at Charis's throat. There's a long streak of blood now marring Charis's white scarf. Charis's eyes are wide, and he's still clutching at his captor's forearm even though it's only making them dig the knife in deeper—

"Let go, Chay," Kat warns.

If Charis is surprised at Kat's use of the diminutive, he doesn't show it, just loosens his grip on the person's forearm as Kat directed.

Only to bring his other hand up, driving his thumb into the pressure point at the person's wrist so that they drop their knife with a howl. Kat surges forward and picks it up, then drives it into their back and up until he feels it hit their spine, dodging out of the way just in time as they fall away from Charis and onto the knife, dead.

“Um—!”

“You’re welcome,” Kat huffs out between breaths, clutching at his side.

Charis has wheeled around, looking around frantically for any other attackers—Kat can tell there aren’t any, anyone else who might have been here has made a break for it—only to spin back around on his heel with a yelp and a curse until he’s right in front of Kat again, practically ripping his scarf off his neck.

“Kat, your side—!”

Charis follows Kat to his knees on the ground, warm and solid at Kat’s back as he rucks Kat’s shirt up and presses his scarf to the wound. Now that the immediate *fight* instinct is fading, it stings, and Charis isn’t being very gentle.

“I won’t be able to drive if you’re doing that,” Kat says after a minute or so.

“Why would you drive? I can get us an airlift?”

It comes out a question. Kat smiles, then coughs, then grimaces at the subsequent sting.

“Can you get one big enough for that?”

He turns his head to the crawler, still parked in the shade of the rocky outcrop. It’s hard to tell, but it looks untouched. Probably because the marauders meant to kill the two of them before ransacking it.

“Not quickly.”

Then not a chance, Kat thinks. He isn't sentimental about very many things, but it took him a year to get everything he needed to build that rig. He laughs once, then winces.

"No airlift," Kat answers.

Charis glares at him. "Fine, if you don't need my help—"

He stands, leaving his scarf. Kat grabs his wrist.

"There's a bottle of liquor in the trunk. There's a handle on the floor with two latches at either side, and it's in there. Bring it to me."

"Why?"

With a grunt, Kat shifts his weight to one arm so he can tug his shirt up further. The motion dislodges the scarf, showing the full extent of the cut at his side.

It isn't fatal, but it is serious. Kat can feel the way his muscles aren't aligning correctly, and every movement of his torso sends stabs of pain up and down that side of his body. He can also feel the way Charis is looking at it, the way his eyes are locked on the wound as though he can't quite believe it's real.

"I'm not going to drink it, Angel. I need to deal with this. The alcohol is a disinfectant."

"Oh. Right," Charis responds, then tears his eyes away and darts off to get it, nearly tripping over one of the dead marauder's legs as he goes.

Turning to face that way hurts, a *lot,* so all Kat can do is listen while Charis fumbles around for the latch—he's about to call

out instructions when he hears a soft *"Aha!"* and the trunk clicks open. Some thirty seconds later, Charis is jogging back to Kat and dropping to his knees at his side, unscrewing the cap.

Kat fights a grimace as he holds out a hand.

"Give it to me."

"No," Charis snaps. He grabs the scarf and finds a clean spot, then empties some of the bottle over it. "You're injured. I'm not. Let me help."

Kat nods with his chin at Charis's still-bleeding neck as Charis adjusts how he's sitting and leans over Kat.

"So that's just a scratch?"

"It's fine," Charis answers, then begins cleaning his wound.

Kat hisses at the contact, muscles clenching involuntarily. It stings, *badly.* But Charis is being gentler now, moving methodically around the edges of the cut before pouring more liquor over the scarf, as though he means to wring it out over the cut.

"Give it to me, this will be faster."

Charis sets the bottle down at Kat's side. Before he can resume his work, though, Kat gently nudges his hand back and empties some of the bottle directly onto the wound.

The sting wells up like a tide. Kat tips his head back, looking at the sky as he grits his teeth and counts his breaths, waiting for it to subside. Before it does, he feels rather than sees Charis

pull the bottle from Kat's grip and wet the scarf again, this time making for Kat's leg.

"There's a first aid kit where you found the liquor. Can you get—"

"Already did," Charis quips, then brings the cloth to Kat's leg without further warning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Charis dreamt of desert marauders that night.

He dreamt of them following him up the cliff he'd climbed. He dreamt he was on top of the cliff when they attacked Kat. He dreamt of the Shed, of marauders on the thin, fast motorcycles that he'd seen in the arena. He dreamt of an arena full of marauders that all followed him home.

But most of all, he dreamt of blood.

There was so much blood. Charis has seen people die—people have tried to kill him before. But his guards carry plasma guns, Arkanene weapons that compromise the molecular structure of whatever they touch. They vaporize their targets. It is instant, nearly painless death.

Not like this. Yesterday was the kind of day with a "before" and an "after." Charis will never be able to unhear the sound of metal tearing through skin and bone, to unsmell the copper tang of blood as it hit the dust. To unsee what Kat had looked like as he'd killed seven people in less than a minute.

Charis had known Kat was dangerous. He'd gone to meet him that day alone *knowing he was dangerous,* but also somehow that it didn't apply to him. Whether because he'd invoked the second eye against Kat or because he is Karra's younger brother, it didn't really matter. He'd known he *personally* would be safe.

Kat, though.

Now, it's a little after dawn, and once again Charis has barely slept. Partially because of the dreams, yes. But more because he can't stop thinking about the wound in Kat's side. The way Kat had ripped his shirt off and poured liquor directly on a deep gash the length of Charis's hand. The way the muscles in his core and sides had jumped with the sting, how his chest had risen and fallen with shallow breaths that he'd forced himself to deepen as he rode out the fresh wave of pain.

Once Charis had cleaned his leg, Kat had held a hand out for the first aid kit. Charis had watched as he fished through it for a pack of needles, sterilized one using the liquor, threaded the needle with a thin black cord, then proceeded to stitch up his own wound without even flinching.

He'd let Charis help him bandage it, both that one and his leg—which did not need stitches—and Charis hadn't been able to look Kat in the face as he'd touched him, feeling the solid ropes of muscle down his torso and thigh that spoke to a lifetime of fighting for survival. He'd felt Kat watching him, felt that hawklike stare on his face and fought viciously not to blush under it.

Charis had helped him walk to the crawler, then gone back for the first aid kit and the now half-empty liquor bottle. By the time Charis had stowed those and climbed into the passenger side, Kat was already seated, the crawler's engine already running.

It took a long time to get back to the city. Navigating the boulder fields without jostling or re-opening Kat's wounds meant they went agonizingly slow through the upper canyon and the collapsed part of the cliff face. They rode in silence,

Charis not wanting to interrupt Kat's concentration as he navigated his manual transmission wheeled transport up fields of enormous rocks, a task which required him to use both arms and both legs. Even when they'd taken a rest at the top some three hours later—nearly four times as long as it had taken them to descend—they hadn't spoken, and Charis hadn't said anything when Kat had smoked three catha cigarettes in a row on an empty stomach and nearly been sick for it.

Charis lays in bed for another hour or so before his stomach forces him up. He plods downstairs in his pjs, making for the kitchen, and is surprised to see Karra there, sitting at the counter with a steaming mug in front of him while he reads a book. One that's bound in paper. He's wearing their father's old wired spectacles. The way these things in combination make Karra look like their father sends a bolt of grief and longing through Charis's gut.

"Chay," Karra says, and sets the book down. He slides off the barstool and walks quickly up to Charis, holding out an arm.

Charis slides easily into his brother's embrace.

It's safe here. Karra is safe. As long as they're together, everything is going to be okay. A few beats later, Charis feels Karra's hand in his hair as he tucks their faces together and kisses the top of Charis's head. Charis feels the bottom rim of the glasses through his hair for a second before Karra pulls back.

"I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried."

Charis can feel the way he wants to get upset at this. He still doesn't think Karra has a right to worry about Charis putting

himself in danger yet when he has been making Charis worry the same way for years. But he can't quite manage anger right now, not when his head is even more full of static than it has been since before the incident at Old Forge.

"Karra, I'm fine. I wasn't hurt."

Karra looks pointedly at the gash on his neck before meeting his eyes again, quirking a brow.

That's a new habit. He got that from Rafel. Rafel, Karra's boyfriend of over a year that Charis has still never met, and who Karra still seems to think Charis has only known about for a few days.

Admittedly, Charis has only known Karra's boyfriend's name for a few days. That part is true.

"How do you and Rafel talk when you're not together?" Charis asks, changing the subject.

Karra goes back to the barstool and takes a sip of whatever is in the mug. Whatever it is, it's green and opaque, and Charis can smell its bitterness from where he's standing across the kitchen island from his brother.

When Karra doesn't answer right away, Charis turns to the fridge and holds his wrist up to the scanner, and Charis watches the data it's collecting on his biometrics flash across the screen without really seeing them. When the check appears, signaling a completed scan, Charis turns back to face Karra and leans on the counter on his forearms.

Karra is staring into his mug like it holds the secrets to the universe. Which is weird, because it was just a question.

“One of Rafel’s people is a talented engineer,” Karra says just as Charis is about to prompt him to answer. Karra is smiling a little bit, but there’s no happiness in it. “She rigged Rafel up an illegal skin monitor.”

Charis’s eyes fly wide open. “You mean he—”

“Yes,” Karra answers, setting the mug down and looking at Charis. “It means what you think it means.”

For a moment, Charis doesn’t breathe. Skin monitors have neural interface, and the person receiving one has to be awake when it’s installed so that it links up properly with their conscious brain and nervous system. Sacrosancts don’t remember this because they have them installed on Arkana as newborns, and on Arkana, there’s technology available to make the process far less difficult and painful. Technology that is *only* available on Arkana.

Charis looks down at his hands, his mind reeling. If Rafel had a skin monitor installed on Earth, what it means is that Rafel endured an extremely long, painful, and dangerous surgery *while conscious* to have the monitor installed.

This changes everything. When he meets Karra’s eyes again, Charis knows he’s not imagining the relief he sees there, knowing Charis understands.

“Do they all have them?” Charis asks without thinking.

Karra tips his head at this. “Why do you ask?”

Charis shakes his head, waving it off. He doesn't want to know.

"Never mind. Next time you go, can you take me with you?"

A few beats fall silently between them, and Charis watches the wheels in Karra's brain turn as he searches for a way to say no. Charis also sees the moment when he gives up on trying.

He knows Karra better than anyone, after all.

"Sure. Let me finish this, and you eat something, then we'll go."

Charis nods, then goes upstairs to change.

Twenty minutes later, he comes back downstairs newly frustrated again. Everything, literally *everything* he owns is white. All of his clothes, all of his shoes—all of his furniture, his bedding, the entire rest of the house. Never has Charis been more aware of it than now.

He's found the least-white things in his closet, a cream-colored track jacket that's almost beige with a white embroidered winged warrior on the back over sweats that are almost grey. He has zero shirts or socks that are anything other than snow white, though, so he grabs the first ones he finds and heads back down.

Karra smiles at Charis as he walks back into the kitchen. He has changed too, ink-black flight jacket over a dark red t-shirt and grey jeans, not a trace of white on him. The colors seem twice as bright amidst the overwhelming white-on-white of their house.

"I've been wondering where that jacket went," Karra says.

Charis rolls his eyes, trying not to feel self-conscious and mostly failing. He answers anyway. “No you haven’t. You gave it to me like two years ago.”

“A year and a half, actually, after my last fight.”

Karra’s smile turns sad, then, and a little guilty. He shakes his head and drains the last of the bitter green stuff in the mug.

Charis had always hated Karra’s fights. Until he’d met Rafel, Karra had been a champion martial artist and underground boxer known as *Valkyrie*—one legal sport, one illegal one. It isn’t unheard of for Sacrosancts to participate in Earth sports of either kind, but even underground, they had to do it on equal terms, meaning they had to shut off inputs from their skin monitors and go in with only their own bodies and brains. Most Sacrosancts simply weren’t willing to do that.

In a way, Karra is far less Sacrosanct than most. He always has been. Or maybe it’s just that he’s far more like their parents than Charis is.

“Ready?” Karra asks, winding a white scarf around his neck, a carbon copy of the one Charis had used to clean Kat’s wounds yesterday. Charis pretends not to notice.

There’s a bag sitting on the counter, its top rolled over a few times and clipped into place, with a bottle of some kind of colorful liquid next to it. Karra never can resist being a mother hen to Charis when he gets the chance. Charis nods and grabs them, then they both put their shoes on and head out to meet the transport.

“So, just so you know,” Karra says as he locks their front door, holding his scarf up to his nose and mouth so the dust the transport’s engines are kicking up off the ground doesn’t choke him. He looks at Charis earnestly, like there something he needs him to understand beneath the actual words he’s saying. “We’re not going to go directly there.”

“I figured,” Charis answers through his sleeve.

Charis sees Karra’s smile in his eyes. It’s a little pinched, but neither of them can be fully sure what the transport can hear or relay of their conversation, even from outside it.

“Good. Getting there is going to be a little weird. Just trust me, though, okay?”

Charis nods. Karra claps him on the shoulder and opens the door.

Charis is quiet on the ride, resting his temple on the window while he watches the Vizor pass by, then the transitional districts. The Vizor is at the top of the highest hill in the city and things get less and less white the further down they go. Karra makes easy small talk with the driver—who is Sagad, the middle of the three Earth classes, like the vast majority of Earth’s population—and before long, Karra’s natural charm has the driver laughing along with him, the tension that Charis always feels radiating off Earth-class people when they’re around Sacrosancts evaporating like water under the desert sun.

Karra has always had that effect on people. Karra is friendly and charming and he makes people feel safe, like equals, no matter what society dictates. Charis has never had that gift. If

anything, the fact he's a celebrity means people are even more on edge around Charis than most Sacrosancts. He envies his brother's normalcy.

"Thanks so much, man. I'll be sure to check that out."

Charis has no idea what Karra and the driver have been talking about, and it's only then that he realizes they've stopped. Karra has already opened his door.

"Actually—! If I could trouble you both for one more thing?"

"Hit me," Karra says.

Charis sees the man flinch a little bit through the rearview mirror. Karra can't see. Charis cringes internally for him anyway—Karra usually means well, but sometimes he doesn't realize how the things he says sound to other people. The driver laughs nervously.

"Ah, well. When I saw that my first call of the day was to the Lyricus-Mensara residence, I was almost late, because my daughter wouldn't let me go without taking this and promising to get it signed." Sheepishly, the driver places something flat on the center console. "I told her I might not even see Velashay, but she insisted just in case…Makorn, do you mind?"

Charis leans forward and picks up what the driver had placed on the center console.

When he sees it, he smiles. It's ancient, it feels like—a small promotional poster from the first concert he'd played after his debut. Small enough to fit in a school locker, which was the point. It's encased in clear fiberglass and framed in shimmering

silver tape, and Charis can't help but smile as he looks back at how this man's daughter has preserved his own years-younger face.

How can he say no to this? He can't.

"Of course," Charis says, and pulls back his sleeve.

He doesn't carry pens anymore, not since an overzealous fan had snuck a tracker into one at a fan signing and followed Charis to the gates of the Vizor, where she'd been intercepted by guards and beaten before Charis could intervene. Instead, Charis plugs a code into his skin monitor and waits.

After a few seconds, the fourth finger on his right hand starts to glow. When it's hot enough, he looks around on the picture for the best place to sign, then quickly etches his signature where it will be most visible.

"What's your daughter's name?" He asks on a whim, trying to ignore the smell of burning plastic. He sees the driver smile with relief in the rearview.

"Anitiya," he says. "She'll be fifteen next week."

The same age Charis had been when he'd played that concert almost six years ago. He suspects the driver knows this. "Tell her happy birthday for me," Charis says, adding a personalized note before cutting the heat and handing the frame back to the driver.

Karra is already outside by the time Charis slides out the same door and closes it behind him. He wraps an arm around Charis's middle and pulls him into his side.

“Have I ever told you you’re my favorite? That was really sweet of you.”

Charis is blushing, even though the transport is already pulling away. “Don’t forget to tip him.”

“Oh, I did,” Karra says with a wink.

They’re in the central markets, now, close to the part that’s pedestrian-only, and Karra doesn’t remove his arm from around Charis for a single second while he steers them off the road and into a small food stall across from a leathersmith’s table. It smells *incredible,* fresh and real in a way nothing in the Vizor ever does, and it’s just as well, because Charis hadn’t touched his food in the transport. It’s only then that he realizes he left it behind.

They eat until they both feel almost sick with it, laughing over stories and relaxing into the easy freedom of just being there, being *them,* without any expectations over them. No one bothers them. Karra pays for their food before Charis can stop him, leaving a tip ten times the price of the food before steering Charis back out onto the pedestrian walkway outside, where they wind through the markets, stopping at various stands before moving on.

“It’s probably fine now,” Karra says at one point. Charis isn’t sure whether Karra is talking to himself or to him, so he waits. A beat later, Karra glances at his covered skin monitor and nods, throwing his other arm around Charis’s shoulders. “This way,” he says.

Karra steers Charis expediently through the marketplace, his grip around Charis never lessening. It seems like they’re going

somewhere with a purpose now. At one point, though, he stops, and Charis stops too.

“Shit,” he says. “We have a tail.”

“What?!”

Charis glances back. He can’t see anything in particular, just people milling around in the marketplace. Karra turns his head back forward.

“It’s okay. Mako and Pax are here, we just need to get outside.”

Charis has no idea what or who Karra is talking about, but once again, he lets Karra steer him through stalls and passageways, faster this time, until they round a corner and the crowd thins tremendously. There’s a sleek, sand-colored transport waiting at the end of an alley.

Two gunshots ricochet against the stone walls of the buildings beside them.

“Shit,” Karra swears. “Chay, shield. Now.”

“What?!”

Karra pushes Charis’s sleeve back and fits his thumb to the scanner on Charis’s skin monitor. A shield deploys instantly. The next second, it seems, Karra is levering off both walls of the alley, pistol in hand—since *when* had he been carrying that?!—and fires off a series of three quick shots before stowing it and grabbing Charis’s wrist, practically hauling him down the rest of the alley at a run.

He opens the door of the transport and climbs in quickly, keeping an arm on the door. In the next second, two bullets hit Charis's shield.

"Karra?!"

"In! Now!"

Charis collapses the shield just as Karra yanks the door shut.

Three more rounds sound off outside. None of them hit the transport. With the doors shut, the transport is shielded. Karra falls back across the seat, pulling Charis with him, his breaths coming quick with exertion.

Then Karra starts to laugh.

Charis scrambles to a seated position, immediately looking Karra over to make sure he isn't injured. He isn't. He squeezes Charis's wrist.

"No more black outside the Boneyard, duly noted," Karra says under his breath, still half-laughing.

"How many times has Rafel told you?"

"Mako, fuck off, man, it was that or two unguarded Sacrosanct deep in enemy territory," Karra says. He looks up at Charis—there's no fear in his eyes, only amusement. Charis doesn't know what to think about that, or anything else that has happened in the last five minutes. "Charis, this is Pax and Mako. Pax and Mako, this is Charis, my little brother. Be nice to him."

“A pleasure, we’ve heard a lot about you,” the man driving the transport says.

Charis looks up at the rearview mirror. He can only see the top half of the driver’s face, but it’s enough to see he has kind, albeit jaded eyes and is wearing glasses. His long brown hair is in a messy bun. “Wish I could say the same,” Charis quips.

The person in the passenger seat, blonde and olive-skinned with a lot of freckles, practically explodes in laughter. Charis frowns. It’s really not that funny to him, so there must be something he’s missing here.

This transport has the feel of an off-worlder. Like most off-world transports, it has no windows in the back. It’s probably for the best, because as soon as they clear the next corner, the driver guns the accelerator forward and Charis is thrown back into the seat with enough force to punch a bit of breath from his lungs.

“*Pax*, careful, man,” Karra says, running a hand over his face.

“I’m sorry, you said you had a tail—I take that very seriously.”

The driver’s tone is dripping with understated sarcasm, and Charis smiles as the driver meets his eyes again in the rearview, like they’re sharing some private joke. Karra kicks the back of the driver’s chair, then hauls himself up to seating.

It’s a quick ride. This transport is *fast,* as fast as anything he’s ever seen on Arkana. Charis has even more questions.

Before he can even begin queueing them up, though, the craft stops.

It hasn't landed. It's just hovering. Out the cockpit window, rings of windblown dust are radiating out from below the transport. At first it looks like they've stopped over nothing, just empty desert and piles of rocks. Half a minute later, though, a huge metal mouth opens up in the rocks below, and the driver drops the transport down the slope and into what is apparently an underground hangar like he does this all the time.

Karra is up and out of his seat as soon as the landing gear is down. Pax looks like he wants to scold him but knows it won't do any good. Charis can sympathize.

"Charis!" Karra calls back. He's already halfway between to a door somewhere in the back of the hangar. "I've gotta go report our tail. Follow Mako, he'll take care of you. And do not, under *any* circumstances, go outside without some kind of cover. I'll explain everything later."

"Karra, wait, what—?"

But Karra is already gone. Charis runs a hand through his hair. "What the fuck is going on?" he mumbles to himself, following the driver out of the transport. Mako follows Charis, closing the door behind him.

Pax looks back at Charis like he's about to say something. The next second, though, a door at the other end of the hangar slams open hard enough to ricochet off the wall, and Charis sees both Pax and Mako reach for their guns until a streak of white comes racing into the hangar, weaving around a small plane propped up on blocks before stopping a few meters from them.

“Fucking *finally,* I’ve been telling him he needs to bring you here!” Leon practically shouts.

For a second, Charis just blinks. He already knew this, he reminds himself—he’s known Leon was involved in all of this for a couple of days now, ever since he started trying to figure out who Kat was and why Karra had been in the Boneyard.

Still, there’s something very jarring about seeing his best friend in an underground hangar, very blasé about having had guns pointed at him a second ago. Charis isn’t sure if Leon even noticed.

And Leon is looking at him like an excited puppy. A beat later, he grabs Charis’s wrist.

“Come on, I’ll show you around. Have you ever wondered where I used to go when I was absent from school all the time?”

He’s already tugging Charis across the hangar, but he turns back for a second with a wink. Charis turns as well—neither Pax nor Mako are stopping this, which means his best bet is to just let it happen.

Charis has known Leon for years. Since grade school. The population of Sacrosanct in the Vizor is a fraction of the population of Sacrosanct on Arkana, so they all know each other. Charis and Leon had been the same year in school almost all the way through, save the couple of early elementary years during Charis and Karra’s father’s final Senate term when their family was still in orbit—Leon, who has lived on Earth all his life, had been the first person to show Charis around

without teasing him for his off-worlder accent, and they'd been best friends ever since.

"I'm so, *so* sorry I didn't tell you before," Leon says as they pass into a dark, stone hallway, then down another series of halls—everything they pass has stone walls, like this entire place has been carved out of the rocks. Leon still hasn't let go of Charis's wrist, but he glances back again. "I wanted to. All the time. They told me I couldn't. They also wanted me to keep you out of all this, but as *soon* as Karra and Rafel started dating, that was a completely lost cause. I told them you and Karra were a package deal and no one would listen to me. What are the fucking *odds* though, right? Your brother and my cousin?" Leon laughs, shaking his head. "Big ass thank you to the universe for doing my work for me, I guess."

"You can thank Karra, actually," comes a new voice from the veritable chamber of a room Leon pulls Charis into. There's an honest-to-god *grid* of computer monitors spanning floor to ceiling in the middle of the room, along with a huge series of curved screens lining half the walls. The man facing one of them is tall and broad, a few years older than Karra, black hair just barely long enough to be pushed back behind his ears, and is wearing a pale grey suit*,* of all things. Half the buttons on his white shirt are open.

It's a power look. He meets Charis's eyes, even though he's talking to Leon. "Had Karra not saved my life behind that bar and then broken three of my fingers when I went to thank him, your agenda may never have been realized."

"Details," Leon mumbles.

Charis blanches at this. "I'm sorry, *what?*"

“He was making a point. I have not underestimated him since.” The man holds out a hand; sure enough, three of his fingers are still slightly crooked. There’s a heavy silver watch at his wrist. “Charis, it’s good to finally meet you. I wish it had been under better circumstances. I apologize for my brother, and my cousins, and anyone else in my family or employment who has inconvenienced you this week.”

“Hey, why am I looped into this, he’s been my best friend for way longer than—”

Charis shakes the man’s hand as Leon keeps spouting off, both of them ignoring him. “Rafel Scaramandis. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Rafel repeats.

Rafel’s gaze is intense. He has the darkest eyes of anyone Charis has ever seen. Everything about him radiates power, despite the fact he’s a class below him and Karra. Apparently that doesn’t matter here.

It’s—interesting. Even more, it’s…actually really cool.

As soon as Rafel releases his hand, Leon grabs his wrist again. “Cool, brother’s boyfriend met, now if you’ll excuse us I’m going to go show Charis around the compound like *I should have been able to for years—*”

“I’m not excusing you, actually,” Rafel answers. “I’m excusing *you,* Leon. There are a lot of things I need to discuss with Chay before anything else happens here.”

Charis is momentarily surprised at the use of the diminutive by someone who is still basically a stranger. Before he can process it, though, a third voice sounds out into the room.

“Do it later, Charis and I have business,” Kat says, his voice rough with fatigue.

Charis spins around on his heel. Kat is in the hallway, leaning heavily against the stone wall behind him to take weight off his injured leg.

“Excuse me?” Comes Rafel’s voice behind him, laced through with irritation.

“Yes, go ahead,” Kat says with a wave of his hand, not backing down.

Silence falls. Charis looks between Kat and Rafel while they have their silent impasse, not sure what to do.

And then, to Charis’s surprise, Rafel relents.

“You have one hour,” Rafel answers on a breath. “You are not to leave the compound. Either of you. Charis, meet me back here when you’re through. If you’re not sure how to get back, send me a message and I’ll send someone to escort you.”

And then Rafel rolls up his sleeve, revealing his monitor.

Charis takes a sharp breath.

Rafel’s arm is—not disfigured, exactly. Charis has never seen anything like the thing Rafel has under his skin before. Except for the screen, Rafel’s monitor doesn’t light up—it’s almost the same color as his skin, just a hair more silver, with black veins of wiring Charis can see beneath the surface of his skin.

There are two long, deep scars on either side of his arm.

He's trying not to stare. Really, he is, and Charis's hand travels up of its own accord as though to touch it before Charis realizes what he's doing. He's not sure how long it's been when he feels a pointed stare at his temple and turns to find Rafel looking at him expectantly, then nodding at the screen.

His contact card is up on it. Quickly, Charis rolls up his own sleeve and enters the number.

"See you shortly," Rafel says, pulling his sleeve down again.

It's a dismissal. He nods and follows Kat, who stands with a grunt when Charis reaches him.

They walk down the hall Charis and Leon had just come through, Charis trying his best to ignore Leon's loud protests at his cousins' hijacking of his plans, then Kat turns a corner Charis hadn't noticed earlier. Halfway down it, the bare rock walls transition to polished concrete, then back to stone.

They pass around a few more corners, then into and out of a couple of rooms and one more hallway before Charis speaks.

"What is it with your family and dragging me around an underground bunker?"

Kat huffs a laugh, then opens one more door, holding it for Charis.

It's another hangar. Or more of a garage, Charis supposes. It's a lot smaller than the first one, and Kat's crawler is by far the largest vehicle in it. The rest are a mix of air- and wheel-born scooters and bikes.

“Do you have a skin monitor?” Charis asks as soon as the door closes.

Kat pauses, looks at Charis in a way that indicates what he thinks of that question, and sits down against a huge crate of some kind, once again taking weight off his injured leg. The cut must have been worse than Charis realized for Kat to be favoring his other leg this much.

“Of course not, Angel, that’s illegal. Why do you ask?”

Illegal. As though anything here is legal. Charis doesn’t scoff, even though he wants to. Instead, he looks Kat dead in the eyes and asks:

“Do you want one?”

CHAPTER SIX

This takes Kat off guard. In fact, it's so far from either the reason he'd brought Charis here or what Kat expected him to ask first that for a good half minute, Kat is silent while he recalibrates.

It's true that Kat has wanted to break into Arkana for some time. Something in his gut has long since been telling him that the smoke isn't just some natural or even human-made phenomenon. Ground-based knowledge networks have turned up nothing, and while he's been able to find some traces on the off-system, his leads have always disappeared as soon as he's found them.

He's been keeping track of his queries, of the last page or forum post he's been able to find before the trail goes cold. Taking screenshots and saving them in a drive that's not connected to any network. Those screenshots are the only thing he has been able to save—apparently not even Arkana can reach bits of data that are orphaned on what is effectively a digital island, reachable only if you're right in front of it.

And Arkana knows something. Kat is sure of it. When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains must be the truth. If he could break into the mainframe—

Well, Kat thinks. He *could* keep trying to get to Arkana. Or, if Charis is being serious, he could give himself a permanent eyeball into the mainframe, and would only ever have to go up once.

Charis speaks again, echoing his thoughts too closely for comfort.

“You want to get into Arkana, right? If you’re going to go through the trouble of getting up there, you should bring it back with you.”

Charis gets it. Kat can see that. This is an offer he cannot refuse, and he doesn’t plan to.

The thing he just can’t wrap his head around is why Charis would do this.

When Kat still doesn’t answer right away, Charis wanders a bit further into the garage. Kat watches him look around, taking in the small fleet of vehicles in various states of repair. This is Kat’s garage, and while not everything in it is his, it’s his domain. Everyone in his family’s employment knows not to come in here without permission.

But Charis doesn’t know that, and Kat doesn’t stop him as he moseys up to a sleek blue racing bike that’s currently up on blocks while Kat rebuilds its engine. Light as a feather, Charis runs his fingers over the curve of its front fender, then the fairing, touching the bike like it’s something breakable. He’s looking at it like he’s never seen one before.

Charis mounts the bike, handlebars and all, and looks up at Kat.

Kat immediately bluescreens.

He’s mounted it correctly, Kat notes, trying to rein in his thoughts as Charis adjusts his posture in the seat without guidance, feeling the bike out intuitively. His long legs are bent

and resting against the tank, his feet at right angles on the foot pegs. He's keeping his elbows soft, not locking his arms, and his back is straight.

He's a natural.

"Why do you think Rafel let us go?" Charis muses aloud, breaking eye contact.

Suddenly Kat can breathe again. "Because I defended you yesterday. Makes us even."

Charis looks up again, a question in his eyes as he squeezes the hand clutch experimentally, taking the oxygen in the room with him again. He tips his head just a bit to one side.

"Does he know how we got ourselves into that situation in the first place?"

In response, Kat just huffs a laugh.

The truth is, he'd pulled Charis aside when he did because Rafel had been about to onboard him into their family's organized crime syndicate without his consent. Given the outstanding invocation of his class right, among other things, Kat wasn't sure Charis wanted to do that.

"Rafel is protecting the family," Kat answers after about half a minute.

"Why? I'm not going to do anything."

Charis is leaning over the handlebars now, squeezing the front brake as though to see how the mechanism works against the

wheel. There aren't enough lights on in the garage for him to be able to see it well right now, but that isn't deterring him.

"Once you know family secrets, you can't leave with them alive."

Charis sits up so fast he nearly falls off the bike.

For a moment, there's real fear in his eyes. But Kat hasn't moved, and there's no one other than them in the garage, and after a few beats, Charis's fear slides into confusion.

"Wait," he says, brows crossing deeply enough to furrow. "Is that why Rafel said not to leave the compound?"

Kat shakes his head. "Rafel said not to leave the compound because if you do, you'll reveal where it is to the mainframe and we'll all die. What we do here isn't exactly legal. Anyone with a skin monitor linked to the mainframe can only come and go in a cloaked transport."

Charis being here won't get him killed. He wouldn't be able to find his way back if he left. But if he onboards, that's it. There won't be any going back.

Kat has no clue what it will do to Charis's demand under his class right, either. And he doesn't want to find out.

Charis's confused look has only deepened.

"What about Karra?"

Kat shakes his head again. "Karra isn't linked to the mainframe anymore."

At this, Charis visibly flinches. “I’m sorry, *what?”*

“He did it when Rafel got his monitor,” Kat continues.

“But he isn’t showing up dead—?!”

This time, Kat cuts Charis off. “Of course not. He’s rigged to a sim.”

Now it’s Charis who falls silent.

A sim, short for simulacrum, is a small-scale AI designed to mimic a human life. They can be randomized or real. Randomized sims, which create an entirely new human identity, are much easier to make, useful for when a person needs a particularly realistic fake identity in the digital space, though they still don’t come cheap.

Real sims are much more difficult. Real sims mimic the lives of actual people. To make a real sim, the AI is fed as much information as possible about the person it’s supposed to be: everything from daily habits, preferences, vices and virtues, and the like all the way down to the way a person types, what kinds of searches they make, which people they talk to, and how frequently. If they’re *really* sophisticated, they even plan and dream.

Because of the sheer number of inputs necessary, it’s extremely difficult to make a real sim for anyone who isn’t Sacrosanct. Most people simply have no way of storing enough data about themselves to make a sim assuming their identity convincing. But for Sacrosancts, the opposite is true. Sacrosanct skin monitors store an *astonishing* amount of data about their users. Everything a person has ever thought or felt, every

memory, every emotion, every biological process. Their speech patterns. How often they blink in an hour. Their average heart rate while sleeping every night since the day they were born.

With the right AI and enough time to process the data, a real sim could become more real than the person it's imitating. And while Rafel had been in surgery—in an room below the rest of the compound known as the silence room, because everyone, including both Rafel and Karra, had thought it best that Karra be kept far away from Rafel's screams—Karra had uploaded his entire 26-year existence into a state-of-the-art sim Kat's father had commissioned personally, then disconnected from the mainframe.

Permanently.

There are consequences to this, of course. While disconnecting from the mainframe means Arkana can no longer see Karra, it also meant losing access to the mainframe's basically limitless knowledge banks. The more physical benefits Karra's skin monitor provides are still perfectly functional—he can still switch on night vision and see in the dark like it's daytime, for instance, and he can still use it to communicate with anyone whose contact card he already has—but anything that requires querying Arkana for something is off-limits.

He's a run-of-the-mill cyborg now, to use Karra's own words.

"Do you see now why I told you that Karra is never going to leave?"

Charis is looking at Kat like he's just brought the dead back to life. After several long moments, though, he hunches forward a bit on the bike until he's holding himself up by his forearms on

the handlebars as the gravity of what Kat has just told him fully registers.

“He never told me,” Charis whispers.

“Of course not. He was trying to keep you safe.”

“Whole lotta good that did,” Charis quips with a sad smile.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Yours, actually.” Charis says through a laugh as his smile turns genuine. He turns it on Kat, whose gut proceeds to somersault without permission.

He looks away and Charis’s smile falls again. Not all the way. *He should have it back*, Kat thinks.

“Karra is really happy, isn’t he.” It’s a statement, probably because Charis already knows the answer. “And you guys aren’t—”

Charis cuts himself off, turns back to look at Kat again. Kat raises an eyebrow. Charis pulls up his sleeve, keeping his thumb pressed to a certain point of his skin monitor.

“I revoke the second eye,” he says as though speaking to an audience. “My request is moot. Amends are not necessary.”

He lowers his hand. Kat waits, his own silence constituting a kind of question that he knows Charis can hear.

Charis lets out a sigh. “You guys aren’t bad,” he says under his breath.

Kat smiles. “Us off-system ne’er-do-wells aren’t bad, hm? Careful, Charis, you’re starting to sound like a revolutionary.”

“You can call me Chay.”

“Chay, then. Angel.” Kat stands, walking over to the motorcycle Charis is still sitting on, gritting his teeth a bit against the pain in his leg and fighting a grin at the way Charis rolls his eyes at the nickname. He sits down on the toolbox closest to the bike. “For your first revolutionary act, let’s get me a skin monitor. How do you want to break into Arkana?”

The mainframe can’t hear Charis inside the compound, Kats reminds himself at the twinge of anxiety he feels. The feeling evaporates with Charis’s wide, genuine smile.

Fuck, he’s beautiful like this.

“Simple,” Charis answers. “We’ll walk in the front door.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reporting the tail in the marketplace is straightforward, and Faramorn doesn't keep Karra long. Faramorn, who is Aravan's right hand, has Karra recount as much as he is able to tell about whoever had followed them: number, weapon types, fighting styles, any noteworthy colors or patterns they were wearing.

There truly wasn't much. Karra knows better, he does, but he'd so been focused on Charis he hadn't been paying much attention to their surroundings. They'd been carrying real guns, that much Karra was sure about, and there were for sure at least two of them who'd chased them based on where the shots had come from. But that was all. Once firing had started, *all* of Karra's attention turned immediately to protecting his brother.

The fact was, and still is, Karra has missed Charis. His belief that keeping him away from the syndicate is in his best interest hasn't actually wavered, but he'd also be lying if he said Charis being here doesn't make basically everything about his life far simpler than it has been for the past year and a half.

And he has hated lying to his brother. He's also a terrible liar, so not lying to Charis has meant not telling him things, and that's been awful on many levels. So as soon as Faramorn dismisses him, Karra practically flies out of his office, making for the control room, where his two favorite humans in the world are finally getting to talk to each other.

Except when he gets to the control room, Rafel isn't there. Vyk is there, sitting patiently on the floor in front of the couch while Meridian braids her hair. Eris is there, too, navigating through

market district camera footage with Pax behind her, probably trying to figure out who'd been tailing him and Charis.

Karra walks up behind them too, trying not to breathe *too* loud, since he kind of ran here. He looks vaguely at the footage, not really seeing it.

"Where's Chay? And Raf? I assume they're together."

Eris and Pax look at each other.

"They weren't when we got here, and we've been here the longest," Eris answers, glancing up at Karra briefly.

"Leon hauled Charis off basically right after you left," Pax adds.

Oh. Right. Charis's best friend of a decade, who has been yelling at Rafel to let him bring Charis here since way before Karra's time.

That's fair. Karra does not slap his own forehead, but it's a near thing.

"I'll get Raf then."

"Good luck," he maybe hears someone call, but Karra is already out the door.

He makes it maybe five steps before almost literally crashing into someone's chest, and Karra looks forward to find Rafel already with a hand on his shoulder, slowing him.

"You are *vibrating* with energy, love, what is it?"

Rafel's voice is amused, but his face looks a bit concerned, and that alone takes enough wind out of Karra's sails that he no longer feels like he's been hooked up to a car battery. Rafel's face softens.

"Come with me."

And then Rafel's arm is across Karra's shoulderblades as he steers Karra down the hall and into another room.

"It's a lot, you know?" Karra says as soon as the door is closed, spinning on his heel so he's facing Rafel. "Like I want to be happy? But we were shot at. And we're okay, he's okay, I'm okay, I'm used to it, but *he's* not. And now I don't have to lie to him, but is he ever going to be safe again—?"

Rafel steps into Karra's space and takes him by the shoulders. Instantly, Karra feels grounded again—which is when he notices what Rafel is wearing at his wrist.

"Hey, wait, this is the watch I got you."

Rafel is smiling now, and this time it's just amused. "It is."

Karra's brows cross, but he's smiling too as Rafel pulls him close enough to wrap an arm around his back. "I thought it was too much?"

"Not for special occasions."

Karra pushes at Rafel's chest enough to look him in the eye. They're about the same height, so this isn't much.

"What, do you have business? You look like you do."

“I do. Very important,” Rafel answers. He’s looking at Karra’s lips. “I finally met the love of my life’s brother after a year and a half.”

Karra practically falls into Rafel, burying his face in the crook of his neck. He grabs a handful of Rafel’s jacket.

“*Raf.* I’m *scared* for him.”

Gently, Rafel adjusts his hold. He brings one arm across Karra’s lower back, the other slowly up across his shoulderblades, letting Karra feel the protectiveness of his hold until he’s pulling his fingertips through Karra’s short hair.

“I know,” Rafel answers.

“What about his guards?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“You—wait,” Karra pulls back again, though Rafel doesn’t move his hands. Rafel’s face is a bit pinched now, and Karra’s forehead once again crashes into his neck when the implications dawn on him. “*Fuck,* really?! See, *this* is why I didn’t want him involved—”

Rafel lets out a breath, resuming the motions of his hand while Karra squares himself with the implications of Charis being involved with the family. There are too many for him to deal with all at once right now.

“It was probably inevitable,” Rafel says when he speaks again.

“I know. I *know,* and I even know it’s not just my fault.” The last part comes out on a bitter laugh. He takes a breath, pulls back,

and this time Rafel does lower his hands. “Speaking of, where is he? And where is everyone else? A few people are in the control room—”

Rafel hasn’t completely let go. “I don’t know about everyone else, but Chay is with Kat.”

Karra freezes. “Wait, *what—”*

Rafel’s hand closes around his wrist almost to the point of pain before Karra can do more than turn on his heel.

“*Love.* I wouldn’t have let them go if I weren’t confident that Chay is safe with him.”

Karra has no idea what his face is doing right now, but he cannot believe what he’s hearing.

“You’ve got to be *kidding me—”*

He tries to pull free, but Rafel is stronger than him. He’s also fast, and he steps into Karra’s path and faces him again without fully releasing his wrist.

Rafel gives Karra a long look. He makes Karra hold eye contact for several seconds, waits until he’s taken two complete breaths before he lets go. “Do you trust me?”

“*Yes,*” Karra says. Why is his voice so thick? “Raf*,* it’s not you. He was all I had for a *long* time—”

“And you still do.” Rafel steps into him again, drawing Karra closer by the hips. “More, even. He can come here. You don’t have to keep secrets. There is probably no Sacrosanct on or off-world who is better protected.”

"*Raf,*" Karra chides. But he's smiling now. As is Rafel, when he reaches behind himself and locks the door. "Wait, were you just trying to get me alone?"

Rafel smile changes.

"I don't expect Charis back for another 45 minutes."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The plan is brilliant in its simplicity. With Charis right in front of him, it's easy to forget he's a celebrity in both worlds. And the majority of their encounters so far have been outliers: normally Charis doesn't go anywhere without a retinue of guards.

"My manager has been giving me shit about not going up enough for months," he'd begun when he'd first told Kat about the plan, rolling his eyes and leaning over the handles of the bike again. "Apparently I've been neglecting my off-world fans. Anyway, we won't even have to do a lot of prep to get you up there. All my guards are Insignis, so all we need to do is pass you off as one of them when we go in."

"And when we leave?"

Charis rested his chin in his hand. "You'll have to pass as Sacrosanct."

There were basically two problems with the plan in its current form, though. One is that Charis's guards will be counted when he leaves, meaning they'd have to find a way to sneak in an extra one somehow.

The other is that absolutely nothing Kat currently owns is white. Which is how, on the eve of their trip up some three weeks later, Kat finds himself alone in a transport bound for the Vizor.

The Vizor is full of people with cameras in their eyes and direct lines of communication to the most powerful AI to ever exist, so to avoid suspicion, Kat had put a white body kit on one of the family's sand-colored ground transports and borrowed

some of Karra's clothes that had gradually begun accumulating at the compound. He'd tried Leon's first, but Kat is taller than his cousin by half a head and they'd been too small.

Karra's were much better. But Karra, who almost never wears white when he's around the family, didn't have anything at the compound suitable for the mission.

"Chay's events are—" Karra had begun when he'd explained the problem to Kat, trailing off a bit until Kat had nodded at him to continue. He let out a sigh. "Well. People go there to be seen. If you're underdressed, people will get suspicious, and the last thing you want to do on Arkana is attract too much attention."

It had seemed counterintuitive to Kat at the time, and it still does. But Karra has been up before and Kat hasn't, so he deferred to Karra.

The plan was to go up under the premise of a fan signing, the sort of event that is relatively quick to plan, would attract a crowd, and would provide an excuse for Charis to have a lot of guards around him during the event itself. Swapping Kat out for another guard would be easier if they could use the crowd as cover.

It was the guards themselves, though, that were the problem. When Charis had gone back for his briefing with Rafel—which Kat had not been allowed to attend, Rafel having spouted off some bullshit about the importance of getting to know his boyfriend's brother one on one that both of them knew was a lie—apparently the first thing Rafel had told him, after the usual spiel about secrecy, discretion, getting in the habit of turning his location tracker off, etcetera, had been that Charis

would not be using his typical guards anymore. He'd be using the family's, who had already been added to Charis's agency roster as employees using false identities.

"They're dead, aren't they?" Charis had asked Kat the next time they were alone, which was a couple of days later. This had followed a question about what was going to happen to his usual guards, a question that Kat very carefully did not answer.

But one of the things Kat is learning quickly about Charis is that it's difficult to keep things from him. His situational awareness is awful—he's too trusting and more than a little naïve, and it had only taken seeing Leon successfully pull pranks on him twice within twenty minutes to remind Kat of this. But he's incredibly observant, and his ability to read what people are thinking and feeling with almost no input is like nothing Kat has ever seen. It's very difficult to get a lie past him.

"Yes," Kat had answered after a long, heavy pause.

Charis had stormed out of the garage without another word, slamming the door behind him. Kat had let him go, figuring he needed space. When he'd reached a stopping point on the wrecked racing bike he'd been asked to help rebuild, though, he'd gone to find Charis in his brother Ariel's wing—the two of them had clicked instantly, with Ariel then proceeding to monopolize as much of Charis's time as he could get—his oldest brother had met him at the door in a dark red silk robe, scowled, and told him Charis left, and that it was Kat's fault.

"I don't know *what* you said to him to make him cry, Michal, but I swear on everything good in your icy little heart that if you don't *fix* it—"

“Where did he go?” Kat asked, cutting Ariel off.

Ariel’s eyes narrowed. He leaned heavily on his cane, glaring at Kat down his nose.

“You should ask *him,* baby brother.”

So he’d tried. Kat pulled out his communicator and sent Charis a message.

—Where are you?

There was a delivery failure. He tried again.

Same problem.

“Did he *block* me?”

Ariel had leaned against the doorframe on one forearm and smiled smugly at Kat, fingers curling over the silver head of his cane. “Good boy,” he said, then spun on his heel and shut the door in Kat’s face.

That had been nearly three weeks ago. He’d seen Charis at the compound a few times since then, but never alone, and never for long enough to talk with him.

He had a right to be angry. If Charis was as close with his guards as Kat’s family is with theirs, news that they’d been killed by an organized crime syndicate for the crime of being staff to said syndicate’s leader’s boyfriend’s brother *was* difficult to sit with. The only light in all of this was that Kat hadn’t had to do it himself. He *did* have to clean up a lot of his family’s messes, but Yen can access a lot of places Kat can’t by virtue of being

Sacrosanct, and he'd accepted the task like it was the order he'd been waiting for all day.

"No torture," Rafel had warned. "Make it quick."

Yen even had the grace to keep his irritation with that order to himself.

Eventually, it had been Karra who'd convinced Charis to unblock Kat's number. Kat had heard when it happened, his communicator buzzing from atop a work bench with each newly-delivered message for nearly a minute until a response to his most recent message came in.

He'd sent it a couple of hours ago. The last set, which was mostly apologies, had been a couple of days before that.

—Are we still going up?

Charis's response was quick.

—Of course we are. I'm good for my word

That felt like a dig, and Kat deserved it. Still, Charis had to know.

—So am I.

—Maybe not with everyone, but with you.

Charis hadn't responded. But when the time they'd agreed on for his trip to the Vizor came, no one had told him *not* to go.

Now, Kat parks the transport in Charis's driveway and climbs out, not even waiting for the craft's landing gear to finish

deploying. Getting into the Vizor had been more nerve-wracking than Kat had expected. In addition to the camouflaged transport and borrowed clothes, he'd been given a device containing Karra's entrance tags, but it had been hard to escape the feeling of being watched from every possible angle, cataloguing the many reasons he still could be thrown out or arrested. He and Karra don't look enough alike for the situation to look like anything other than stolen tags, and if entrance to the Vizor required some kind of biometric scanning, he was fucked.

"That won't happen," Karra had promised. "Earth-class transports come in all the time. I promise, getting into the Vizor is going to be the least of your problems."

It hadn't helped that his heart had been in his throat during the whole drive. Because of Charis, yes, but also because he hates flying. Even at the very low altitudes most ground transports travel at.

The door is unlocked when Kat arrives. Charis's back is to him where he sits at the counter, scrolling through something on a holoscreen, but he glances back when he hears the door open.

"*Fuck,* Angel, I need to start coming to you."

The house is not small from the outside. From inside, it's downright cavernous. It's built into the hill on the side facing away from the city, and there's a small set of stairs that form a half-circle at the end of the foyer, leading down to a living area the size of his garage with floor-to-ceiling windows probably four meters tall. On one side, the kitchen adjoins it; on the other, an elegant, curved staircase leads to a second floor Kat can't see from here.

The view, though.

The view is incredible. There are trees in the Vizor—the only place in the city that has them, hardy, needled things that can survive on almost no water—and a pair of them frame the windows, opening up a sweeping vista of white houses and resilient green plants along probably half the hillside. Closer to the bottom, the gardens transition back to more familiar desert rockscapes before falling abruptly down a rolling, dune-like slope that fans out in both directions like the two prongs of a crescent moon.

Beneath *that*, the mountain gives way to sand as far as the eye can see.

It must be beautiful at night, Kat thinks. All that sand under a pale moon. The desert is many things—strict, capricious, unforgiving—but ugly is not one of them.

“They say it used to be the ocean,” Charis says, coming to stand next to Kat.

They’re in the living room, now, in front of the huge windows. Kat turns to Charis. The amount of relief he’s feeling that Charis is okay with being this close to him is probably something he should interrogate, but that can wait.

“Who’s they?”

Charis shrugs.

“Dunno. Whoever built this place, maybe. Or maybe it was a lie we were fed when we were young so we’d believe things haven’t always been this way.”

Charis doesn't seem to be talking about the view anymore. He's still looking out the window, though, so Kat takes the opportunity to study him.

The Charis Kat had known before they'd met is the Charis that everyone knows: Velashay, the pop star, actor, and model who's always smiling, even when he's singing about heartbreak. He's particularly known for his lyrics, for the characters he creates in his songs and the way he cuts to the heart of every human emotion, making familiar experiences feel simultaneously new and profound. And yet, he's also simultaneously out of reach. He's yours, but he isn't. Relatable *and* untouchable. Despite all that, though, it's very difficult not to like either his music or his public persona, relentlessly sunny as it is.

The Charis in front of him is different. Somehow he's even more thoughtful than his lyrics. It's the bitterness in his voice that makes Kat want to flinch, though.

"What hasn't always been this way?" Kat prompts.

Charis meets Kat's eyes, then looks him up and down in a way that sends a sudden bolt of desire through Kat. Charis is speaking again before it can settle.

"Why should you have to sneak in here? Why is this place off-limits to everyone else? It's not right."

That was not what Kat expected Charis to say.

"Angel," Kat says, unable to keep all of his surprise out of his tone. "When I said you were starting to sound like a revolutionary, I didn't think you'd go full bore this fast."

Is this the way to forgiveness? Something about the way he was speaking just now suggests Charis hasn't been angry with Kat specifically for the last three weeks, though the blocked number is still a mixed signal if ever Kat has seen one. It doesn't seem like Charis is acting like nothing happened, but Kat isn't sure yet if he's supposed to ignore the elephant between them or acknowledge it.

"I'm a quick study," Charis replies, looking back to the window for a moment before he lets out a long breath and turns fully around, making for the stairs to the foyer. Halfway there, though, he stops. "Shit, I forgot. Normally everyone who comes here is Sacrosanct. Do you want anything?"

Kat raises an eyebrow. Charis blushes.

That's…an interesting reaction, all things considered.

"I mean—to eat or drink, before I go up and raid my brother's closet. Since the kitchen can't read you."

This makes no sense whatsoever, and Kat says as much.

"Come again?"

Charis's blush deepens. *Oh, this is fantastic,* Kat thinks, though he also knows not to push his luck *too* far right now.

"You—gah, it's easier if I show you."

Charis strides into the kitchen. As he approaches it, one of the cabinet doors opens seemingly at random, and Charis removes a tall drinking glass from it before it closes again. He approaches the fridge next, holding his left wrist up to a

scanner Kat is only just seeing—the left door opens, revealing an entire display full of bottles of various colors. After a beat, a little claw in the door holds out something bright pink and slightly carbonated, and Charis takes it and pours it into the glass, taking a sip.

“I don’t have to tell it what I want. It just knows. Though I’ve never been able to uninstall the health protocol my mother put on it.” Charis smiles at the memory. It’s a little sad. “Anyway—once we get you a skin monitor, it will do the same for you.”

“You mean it’ll just know what I’m craving?”

Kat has joined Charis in the kitchen, now, and he looks meaningfully at Charis, this time trying deliberately to get another blush out of him. It works a little bit, though Charis is looking down at his glass rather than at Kat.

“Yeah, it’s biometrically linked.”

Charis either didn’t pick up on the innuendo or is deliberately ignoring it. Suddenly, Kat doesn’t know which one he prefers. Still, there is something unsettling about the kitchen’s apparent semi-sentience.

“You don’t think it’s weird that the technology under your skin can project your thoughts to your household appliances?”

Charis takes another sip, then tips his head a bit, thinking it over for a few beats before he answers. “Huh. No, I’ve never thought of it that way before. I guess it is actually kind of weird.”

How much of you does Arkana get? Kat wants to ask. He doesn't.

He does earmark this, though. He needs to talk to Karra.

"Anyway—if there *is* anything you want, have at it. I'll be right back."

Charis sets his mostly-full glass down and practically flies out of the kitchen before Kat can make another wisecrack.

Kat watches him go, then listens for the sounds of his footsteps upstairs. He hears a door open on the second floor.

When the sound stops, Kat turns back toward the living room. This time, he looks around, mentally cataloging everything in it. There's a huge two-sided sectional and matching armchair with a low table in the middle in front of what looks to be an actual fireplace, framed elegantly with subtle carvings of leaves and vines in the pale marble. The mantle over it is polished limestone with a collection of candles and split-open agates and thunder eggs arranged in artistic little clusters. As Kat approaches it, an array of scented reeds smells faintly of lemongrass, something Kat hasn't smelled since he was a child.

Above the mantle is a formal, seated family portrait. This close, it's obvious it was painted by hand. Both Karra and Charis are much younger in the picture, perhaps ten years younger than they are now. Their mother has one hand on Charis's shoulder, the other on her husband's.

Karra, seated on the taller of two backless dieses, is leaning slightly back against both of his parents, as though he wants to tip the stool he's sitting on to look up at them rather than the

painter. Charis, on the other hand, is looking at the painter, eyes twinkling with something that could be mischief as easily as prescience.

Kat would have known Charis by his eyes. He knows that now, even though the child on the edge of adolescence staring back at Kat from the portrait with Charis's eyes is a girl. She's tall for her age, even seated—long, espresso-brown hair falling in loose ringlets nearly to her waist, her white tunic and formal dress trousers identical to her mother's—with Charis's rich, mahogany eyes.

Kat stares at her. The girl in the picture has a hand curled around her knee as though she were holding it down, her fingers long and slender. Musician's fingers. He'd felt them on his own skin three weeks ago when Charis had helped dress his wounds after the marauder attack at the gorge.

Kat feels the scab in his side pull suddenly at the memory as his mind works to reconcile the picture in front of him with the Charis he knows. With the artist known as Velashay, the open book with so many secrets.

His mind reels. He remembers the assassination, how news of it had trickled down to the Boneyard. Their father had been a high-ranking diplomat and occasional politician, their mother a model-turned-earth scientist known for her radio show *Terra Sancta*. And even as a teenager, Kat had known that Lyrian Lyrianus Cygnara had been something of a radical in the Arkanene Senate—something he'd heard his uncle Aurivash making noise about from time to time, as though he himself wasn't part of a family that actively subverted it.

They'd been shot on a bridge just outside the Vizor while out on an evening walk. The culprit had never been found.

Kat moves on from the portrait, reluctantly. There are rooms on either side of the kitchen. Two on one side of the staircase leading to the second floor—one door open, one closed.

The door that's closed is locked. There are no windows. Kat peeks into the other.

It's a study of sorts. Small, but comfortable. Built-in bookcases line almost every wall, aside from one that's a floor-to-ceiling window, much like in the living room.

What's refreshing in this room is that nothing is white. The bookshelves are some kind of dark wood, most of them packed to the brim with actual paper books.

Kat stows his astonishment at this and forces himself not to linger, mulling briefly over whether or not to break into the locked door. It's probably not the time for that—Charis might come down any minute, and he's probably still angry, even though he's masking it well. Kat doesn't need to add fuel to that fire right now.

The other room off the kitchen is a dining room. This one *is* mostly white, but not entirely. The elaborate light fixture above the twelve-seat dining table is wrought in pale gold, and the rug beneath it is woven in silver, white, and beige in what looks to be a Persian design. There are several old-style impressionist paintings along the walls.

Kat walks out into the kitchen just as Charis comes downstairs again.

“I think I’ve found a few things that might work, do you want to come have a look?”

The real Charis is in front of him again. The one Kat knows. He’s wearing a similar top to the one he’d worn in the warehouse, wide, slightly draped neckline that shows his entire collarbone over cargo pants that wouldn’t be out of place in a dance video. He isn’t wearing shoes, though, and it’s then that Kat notices he hasn’t taken his off. He quickly does so, setting them by the stairs as he meets Charis on the landing.

“Lead the way, Angel.”

Charis definitely blushes at this. He quickly turns around and leads Kat upstairs, and Kat only spends part of the climb watching Charis’s ass.

There are floor-to-ceiling windows on this floor, too, once again highlighting the overwhelming whiteness of everything: soft white carpet, white walls that are mostly bare, but where Kat can see scratches and holes suggesting things had once hung there. Charis turns left, where the shorter of the two hallways leads to a door that’s already open.

Karra’s room is sparse. There’s a huge bed in the center of it and a desk to one side, but not a lot else. There are two closets, though: one with sliding doors that are entirely mirrors, which is shut, and another, much larger walk-in closet next to what Kat is already sure is the most luxurious bathroom he’s ever seen. And this probably isn’t even the master.

Charis has thrown a few things he’s decided are contenders on the bed, still on their hangers. He’s standing between the open closet door and the bed.

“You and Karra have really different styles, but these were a few things I thought might fit under a guard uniform without being overbearingly hot. Thankfully you have similar builds.”

Kat glances at Charis, then goes to the side of the bed where he’s laid things out. The bedspread and sheets are white, so he has to hold things up to the window to really see what they look like. The hanger he’s picked up holds a pair of ripped-up, slim-cut white jeans that Kat immediately sets to one side as a strong possibility. Most of the rest look more like Rafel’s style than his, aside from a pair of cargo pants similar to the ones Charis is wearing now.

The shirts, though. That’s where Kat can see what Karra meant about people going to these events to be seen. The first one is a long-sleeved white top that looks innocuous until Kat holds it up to the light, revealing a back that’s made up mostly of thin white chains that swing a little as he picks it up.

He likes this one, but it won’t work. He sets it in the *yes* pile anyway, though, because he wants to see Charis’s reaction when he puts it on.

The next one is short-sleeved, the sleeves mostly made up of bands of white studs. He likes this one too, but this one won’t work either unless he were to wear a jacket over it, and that would likely be uncomfortable under a guard uniform. None of the short-sleeved or tank tops will work, actually, which is too bad, because Charis has picked well and a lot of them really are close to his style.

There’s one more long-sleeved one, and this one makes Kat turn around with a raised brow. Charis blushes again when he does.

“I wasn’t sure how much you were willing to lean into the part,” he says, not looking at Kat.

This one has a high neckline, but the front is mostly a deep vee with thin, gauzy mesh in the cut. The back isn’t much better with its ripped slashes down the shoulderblades, the top two of which are bracketed by a series of three silver, curving studs. This one *absolutely* will not work, not least because it would clearly show the still-healing cut on his abdomen from the marauder attack, but there’s a part of Kat that’s extremely curious to know why Charis selected it.

The shoes are a pair of combat boots and a pair of low ankle boots similar to what Yen wears. He sets the combat boots beside the *yes* pile.

“Karra doesn’t really wear jewelry, but you can borrow some of mine,” Charis says once Kat makes his initial selections. “You can change in the closet or bathroom if you want—”

Kat takes off his jacket, setting it on the end of the bed, and reaches for the hem of his shirt, pulling it off in one quick motion. Charis makes a sound behind him that’s almost like a squeak, and Kat fights a smile as he hears Charis spin on his heel, no doubt to give Kat privacy.

Kat pulls the first shirt off the hanger and puts it on. The chains are cool against his skin.

“Thoughts?” Kat says, giving Charis a view of his back.

Charis gasps.

He knows what Charis is seeing. Kat's back is heavily scarred, including a couple that are the products of attacks by desert marauders and rival gangs that he shouldn't have survived. Most have faded a bit, but there are a couple that are still very dark and obvious.

That may have been what drew the reaction—more likely, though, it's the tattoo that curls over his shoulders and down his entire back, two symmetrical crows about to land on symmetrical branches holding a nazar between them, which legends from before the first nuclear winter said would ward off the evil eye. Below the nazar is an elaborate crescent moon whose points tip up toward the crows.

Some of his scars cut through the design. Which is a shame, but there's nothing he can do about it. Kat can tell from the way the thin chains fall against his skin that most of both his tattoo and his scars are visible.

"Shit," Charis says. "None of these will work."

He's right. Kat turns around.

"What, Sacrosancts don't have tattoos?"

Charis is bright red, and he isn't looking at Kat.

"Not…really…? When they do, they aren't that big—" With a shake of his head, Charis cuts himself off. "Did they…hurt? Not the scars, obviously, but—"

"A bit, yeah," Kat answers, gently cutting Charis off.

It isn't a lie, but it isn't the full truth, either. The truth is, while there were some parts of his back that were more sensitive to the tattoo gun than others, being tattooed over his scars felt like someone was dragging a knife through his skin. Charis doesn't need to know that.

"Well." Charis runs a hand over his face, then passes by Kat, picking up most of the things he'd laid out for Kat aside from the *yes* pile. Kat watches him hesitate for a second before shaking his head—probably mulling over whether or not to ask for the shirt back that Kat was currently wearing. "There were a couple of other things that might work—"

"What about something of yours?" Kat asks.

Charis pauses in the closet doorway before hanging Karra's clothes up. He doesn't answer right away, instead putting the shirts and boots back where he'd found them before glancing at Kat.

"Okay. But you have to promise not to judge me."

Well *that* settles things. Kat moves silently to the doorway and leans against it, hands in his pockets, while Charis puts the slacks away, and Charis jumps a bit when he turns around again and sees him. He even touches his fingers to his chest.

"Dammit, you've gotta stop doing that!"

Kat raises a brow. Charis sighs.

It looks like there's something he wants to say. Whatever it is, he doesn't say it, though Kat would swear Charis just bit his tongue inside his mouth.

Kat has time. He can wait.

“Please, Kat. Stop joking around.”

Charis isn’t looking at him. They’re close—close enough that Kat could touch Charis if he wanted to—but Charis’s hands are in his pockets, and the flush on his cheeks is different somehow to the others Kat has drawn out of him today.

“I’ve needed time,” Charis says after a long moment. “I wasn’t close to my guards. By design, actually. You’ve seen what they wear—most of the time I never even see their faces before they’re switched out. That’s how the agency does things. But Kat,” Charis wheels around to face him, resting just slightly against the other side of the doorway—not quite mirroring him, but close enough that he can smell whatever Charis uses in his hair, like he had in the canyon. “They’re dead. Because of me. I’ve needed time to reckon with that.”

Kat has enough blood on his hands to sail a ship on it. He wants, *so* badly, to say it isn’t so, but he has promised Charis he wouldn’t lie to him.

Charis meets his eyes, continuing on before Kat gets his thoughts in order. He’s quietly grateful.

“I’m in now, and I don’t really have a choice,” Charis continues. “But I’ve needed time to reckon with what being involved with your family means. And I didn’t want my judgment to be clouded.”

He’s blushing a bit deeper now. This *does* seem closer to what Kat drew out of him earlier, though he can’t quite put his finger on why.

“And anyway, I’ve also needed time to make some arrangements.”

He passes out of the doorway—not quite brushing Kat’s shoulder as he does, but it’s a near thing.

“What arrangements?”

Charis glances back at him, but he doesn’t stop. He smiles—*the way he always should*, Kat thinks before he grabs that train of thought by the tail and reels it back in.

“I wrote a song. A couple, actually. My agency will be releasing one at the signing, which will be the first time anyone outside the studio hears it. Listen carefully,” he says.

CHAPTER NINE

It's nearly midnight, and Rafel is wide awake at his desk.

He can see Karra from where he sits. Rafel's room is L-shaped, half of it being his office, and there's an old-world ornamental mirror on a stand on his credenza. The way it's angled gives Rafel a view of Karra's side of the bed.

Karra had been amused when he'd found out. He'd been plastered to Rafel's back, arms over Rafel's shoulders and hands clasped in front of him as he tried to pull Rafel's attention away from a series of ledgers from Faramorn, when he'd looked up and caught a glimpse of the mirror. That must have been the first time he'd really seen it, given how rarely Rafel let anyone into his office. But as with many things, Karra is an exception to his privacy, and he'd felt Karra's amused huff against his back and in the puff of breath above his ear as Karra knocked his forehead into Rafel's temple.

"Did you put that there just for me?"

Rafel hadn't, but he would have if it weren't already there. They don't use security cameras at the compound, as they are too easily compromised, and the mirror allows Rafel to watch his door while he's working. All the same, even if Rafel were to spend the rest of his life only looking at Karra, it still wouldn't be enough.

The magnitude of his desire for Karra is a weakness. Rafel knows that. He has also never in his life been more alive than he has been in the past year and a half, and it had not taken his father very long at all to recognize this.

Rafel's father is still very much the spider at the center of the web, but Rafel is his heir after what had happened to Ariel. Ariel, who is two years older than him, was abducted by a rival syndicate called the Felun Shad when he was a teenager, so named for a kind of weapon carried by desert marauders. The Felun Shad wanted the market district, which had been Scaramandis territory at the time. By the time his family found Ariel, they'd ripped out most of his fingernails and had broken his leg and hip so badly that Ariel still cannot walk easily without his cane.

Aravan, for all that he only values people who are useful to him, has a soft spot for Ariel. And it's not unwarranted, even by his standards. Ariel's physical movement and his functionality with his hands may be limited, but Ariel can read a room, a voice, or a gesture like no one else Rafel knows. And his word has more sway over their father than anyone's.

It had been Ariel who had told both Rafel and their father not to let Karra get away.

Karra is asleep on his stomach, one knee and one wrist hanging off the edge of the bed where Rafel's deep red sheets have fallen away. It had taken three rounds this evening before he'd managed to tire Karra out enough to overtake his worry over Charis.

That he himself is awake is of no consequence. A lifelong insomniac, Rafel is no stranger to the witching hours, and he has a vial of sedative in a hidden drawer in his desk if it really becomes a problem.

Rafel is grateful that Karra cannot go on the mission tomorrow. Disconnecting from the mainframe means that Karra no longer

has his entrance credentials for Arkana—if anyone rigged to a sim attempts to enter through their monitors, the mainframe registers their presence as a stolen identity and retaliates against the anomaly. And while Karra *could* conceivably go under an Insignis guise, when Rafel had arranged for Charis's guard clearance with his agency, he'd been sure to leave Karra off the list.

The problem is, Vyk *is* going. There had been no good way around that. Vyk is the highest-ranking member of the syndicate other than his family and Faramorn, and Vyk has long been adamant that she will not put anyone she is responsible for in a position she would not assume herself.

And Vyk is not quite bilingual in Arkane, but she's pretty damn close.

Rafel sets his ledger down and makes his way out of his office, pausing for a moment just to watch Karra take a breath. But Karra is a heavy sleeper, and Rafel already knows even before he opens the door that he will still be right where Rafel left him when he gets back.

Rafel feels Vyk's eyes on him even before he enters the control room. She's sitting on the back of the room's long couch, her curly black hair in a braid between the two closely-shaved sides of her head, elbows over her knees as she spins one of her short throwing knives by its center between her thumbs without looking at it. As long as he's known Vyk, she's almost always had something in her hands.

Vyk is to Rafel what Faramorn is to his father. There is likely no one in the entire syndicate he trusts more, not even Karra. And unless it's necessary for her to do so, Vyk rarely speaks, so Rafel

has long since learned to read her eyes and body language for whatever messages she may have for him that she is not conveying aloud.

Here, now, it's not hard to tell. Also in the room are Mako, Pax, and Kratha—respectively, Rafel's training director, his surveillance chief, and his weapons master. Kratha and Pax will not be on the mission, which means that Vyk and Mako are making sure that Kratha and Pax are prepared to assume their roles should anything happen to them off-world.

Pax is radiating tension from where he's sitting in Eris's swiveling chair some distance away from the rest, one foot on the floor as he turns it in quarter turns. Kratha is listening with equal parts attention and patience.

Mako, on the other hand, is sprawled out on the couch, one hand in his blonde hair, and his height means he's taking up most of the couch even with his knees bent, as blasé as he ever is about the prospect of walking into the line of fire. He's facing Kratha, who is statue-still where she stands against the one wall in the room that isn't covered in monitors or technical equipment.

"—it's just, you know. Make sure everyone's eating and sleeping. Hobbies are fine, just don't let anyone get too fixated. Honestly, the hardest part is figuring out what everyone's *like* in the kinds of ways you can't put on paper. Like obviously Sonja and Cade are a boxed set, since they're twins, but try not to have them work with Meridian too much because she's such a lone wolf, it's better to put them with—"

"Cure or Tate," Rafel says. Mako flies upright, head whipping around toward Rafel, and Rafel sees Kratha smirk a bit in

amusement as a bright blush overtakes Mako's face. "Or Nova, actually, if Aguilanos can spare him."

Cure and Tate are promising members of the syndicate, both quickly earning their places as they demonstrate their loyalty and skill to Vyk, and through her to Rafel. But they are also twenty and twenty-two, respectively, and there is no substitute for experience. Everyone in this room has been with Rafel for a decade or more.

Rafel had hired Nova specifically for his medical training. He'd been expelled from his program when he'd been caught stealing and selling opioids and barbiturates to the Mechaivads and the Trumorns, both among the most ruthless Sagad crime families in the region—and also each other's fiercest rivals. It's for that reason that neither family is a priority concern to Rafel, unlike the Felun Shad.

Nova had impressed Rafel for two reasons. The first was that he made his deliveries personally. The second was that neither the Mechaivads nor the Trumorns knew either his identity or the fact he was dealing with both families. His medical knowledge is what Rafel prizes the most, but his discretion and his skill in the field are truly excellent, and Nova trains with the others whenever Aguilanos, the family doctor, doesn't need a second set of hands around.

The fact the Nova is a pragmatist rather than a soldier is why he is not in this room right now. It's also likely the reason Kratha is looking at Rafel now with one black brow arced halfway to her hairline, her dark features incredulous.

"Really."

“Yes,” Rafel answers. “Nova has excellent coordination of every kind. When he’s in the field, it’s a waste to have him work alone.”

Heavy silence falls in the room as Vyk, Mako, Pax, and Kratha digest the underbelly of that statement. Kratha breaks eye contact and nods.

This is not a conversation any of them want to be having. But off-world missions are several orders of magnitude more difficult than anything they do on the ground, and Aravan had made it clear to Rafel when they’d spoken earlier that evening that everyone in this room, including Rafel, needed to be fully prepared for what retaliation from the mainframe may involve. On the ground, after all, most threats to their lives come from other people.

From what Rafel understands of how the mainframe choses who and who not to protect, the mainframe is unlikely to harm Charis, and potentially Kat as well if they get as far as installation of his monitor. With a monitor but not the blood, Kat is a wild card if they get that far. But the other six who will be posing as guards are completely unprotected.

Suddenly it’s very difficult to look at Vyk. He turns to Pax instead.

“*Arkan koushan ikas?*” Rafel asks in Arkane.

In his peripheral vision, Rafel sees Vyk bite her lip and turn her face from Pax’s line of sight, hiding her small, amused smile.

It’s not a difficult question, and Rafel already knows the answer. He knows the only person in this room besides him

who can actually speak Arkane well is Vyk, though they all understand it. But when Pax doesn't respond immediately, it's Mako who speaks in his stead.

"Um, we haven't really been—"

"*De soum ovichay rekal,* Mako," Rafel snaps.

Mako isn't exempt from his own practice just because he can form complete sentences in Arkane. There's a beat before Mako answers, chastened.

"*Ya shul.*"

"If you aren't sure how to occupy yourselves tomorrow, practice your Arkane," Rafel orders the whole room. "Do not underestimate how significant a tactical advantage it is to be able to speak a language almost no one else on Earth can speak."

There's an underside to this statement, too, and this one falls even heavier in the room. The ability to speak Arkane is a requirement for this mission. Pax nods, still not looking at Rafel.

Another beat. The silence stretches into awkwardness. Rafel lets it.

He feels Vyk's stare in his temple before he turns to her.

The look in Vyk's eyes isn't disapproval, exactly. But she *is* telling him to stop. Rafel holds her eyes and lets out a breath, acknowledges her with the smallest of nods, and leaves without another word.

He shouldn't take his frustrations out on them. He knows that. But he would also be lying to them and to himself if he claimed this mission didn't have him on edge.

Rafel and Kat are not close. Not like Karra and Charis. But he and Ariel are, and Rafel pauses by his brother's door for a long beat on his way back to his own room.

Just as Rafel is about to move again, the door opens.

Ariel is leaning against the wall by his door with his back to it, his cane beside him. He crosses his arms over his chest again once he opens the door. He's smirking a bit.

"You look like you've been here a while," Rafel says.

Ariel rolls his eyes. "You have the loudest footsteps of anyone in this entire fucking compound. Do you know what an elephant is?"

"…No."

"Neither do I. Father has some novel from the old world that talks about them. Anyway, come in, it's cold in the hall."

With that, Ariel takes his cane and stands, hanging back as Rafel does as he's told.

After Ariel's abduction, as their mother was a couple of years dead by that point, Aravan had given him his and their mother's old rooms. This served two purposes: these rooms are the most comfortably outfitted in the entire compound, and they are also closer than any other chambers to the command rooms should Ariel want to join the family's activities.

“I noticed you yelling at Pax and Mako,” Ariel says behind him while Rafel makes for his usual chair, sitting down heavily and interlacing his fingers behind his head. He arcs a brow.

“Through the walls?”

Ariel huffs as he joins Rafel, though his descent is much slower. Once comfortable, Ariel sets his cane against an arm of the chair. “Through my cameras, obviously. And before you freak out about compromised networks, they’re not for security. They’re for snooping. I had Eris put them in when Chay got here so I could live commentate everyone’s evil scheming in the control room for him.”

Rafel only places bets he knows he can win, and Rafel would guess that about a third of what Ariel just said is true. But Ariel is speaking again before Rafel can call him out on the lie.

“What did they do, anyway? You looked pissed.”

This is not why Rafel came in here. He looks vaguely toward the wall opposite as he answers. “They’re neglecting their language training.”

“Oh, is that it? If they need to practice being evil in Arkane, send them to me, we both know I’m the best teacher in this hole.”

Ariel stills, then, and Rafel both sees in his peripheral vision and feels in his temple as Ariel locks his gaze on Rafel and waits for him to crack.

It doesn’t take long.

“I’m tired, Rie.”

Ariel arcs a brow. “I know you are. You don’t fucking sleep, then you take all the worry you can’t blow into Karra out on them.” Ariel nods with his chin at the screen where the control room feed is playing. “Let me guess. You’re thinking about what will happen to Karra if something happens to Chay.”

Rafel closes his eyes and takes a slow breath. *This* is why he came here—because Ariel knows what he’s thinking better than he does.

“Yes.”

Ariel swats Rafel’s leg with his cane.

“*Ow*—excuse me?!”

Rafel’s eyes have flown open to find Ariel looking at him with something like exasperation.

“*Rafel*. Have you ever met a *single* human on this flying, dried-up space rock more obsessive than our beloved Kat?”

Rafel huffs. They’ve both watched their youngest brother’s obsession with the smoke grow deeper and deeper in real time. And the more he found—or *didn’t* find, as has been the case recently—the more fixated he has become.

Rafel would be more irritated about it than he is were their father not actively encouraging Kat’s behavior, in his way, though Rafel cannot begin to understand why. And with how their father wields information, Rafel will never know the answer unless he asks the right questions, and he simply does

not have the time to suss out what those might be while also running most of the Scaramandis syndicate, now that Aravan has begun to step back from the helm.

It's not that he and Ariel don't believe Kat. It's that one doesn't have the mental bandwidth to share his obsession and the other doesn't have the ability, now that Kat won't fly anymore.

Except. Wait.

Ariel is smiling now, his whole demeanor smug as he sits back in his chair and crosses his arms, one scarred fingertip tapping rhythmically near the fold of his elbow.

"Ah. I see you understand now," Ariel says. "My dear Rafel, it seems the men of our family share a taste."

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning, it's time to go.

Charis goes back to the compound with Kat that night, because that's where they'll be leaving from. The Sacrosanct side of the family has a perfectly legitimate, registered off-world transport—one of the only things Charis already knew about them, actually, because he and Leon have ridden in it before.

For the first time in ages, though, Charis has a flutter of nerves as he gets ready. He knows he needs to look good for this event, particularly because it's been a while since he's done one, and Leon only gives him a little bit of shit over the outfit he's picked.

"Man, you're going to drive him insane," he says after finishing his own prep. He's standing to one side of the low dresser where Charis has laid out his makeup and skin care products, leaning against it.

A relatively new addition to the plan is that Leon is going with them. It had been his suggestion, actually: because Leon is Sacrosanct, he doesn't need an excuse to go to Arkana, and he can switch clothes with Kat while Kat gets his monitor.

More importantly, though, is that Leon speaks Arkane. Arkane is the only language spoken on Arkana, and there are very few speakers of Arkane who are not Sacrosanct. Kat is bilingually fluent in Arkane, albeit with a grounder accent, but most of the syndicate isn't. Most understand the language but can't necessarily speak more than a few simple sentences.

Really, it's a great idea. One less person to hide. But being in on the plan has the additional side effect of making Leon excited, which means he won't stop talking about the mission. This is actually the first thing Leon has said in almost an hour that *didn't* directly have to do with it.

"What? Drive who insane?" Charis asks as he finishes one eye of winged eyeliner. Since it's not time to go up yet, they're still speaking the common language of Earth, like they usually do—also because he and Leon have the same accent in the common language, so Leon is less likely to tease him.

"Look at you," Leon says, not answering the question. "Sometimes I forget you're a celebrity. You're going to drive *everyone* insane, but Kat is going to lose his mind."

Charis was about to start the other eye, but he lowers his hand at this.

"I can't—no. No, he doesn't think of me that way."

Leon raises a brow. Charis suddenly realizes this is a family trait. He feels himself blush, though he's wearing enough foundation to cover it.

Leon doesn't respond right away, so Charis goes for his other eye. It takes long enough that Charis is surprised when Leon still hasn't responded by the time he's done. When Charis looks at his best friend, he's looking at his shoes with a smug smile on his face and looks to be possibly literally biting his tongue.

"Just tell me," Charis says.

Leon laughs. "I don't have to. You'll see."

Charis sighs audibly and reaches for the palate of blush he's selected.

When it's time, he follows Leon out of the room, down winding halls that lead to the hangar he'd first arrived in. All of the guards who will be going with them are lined up outside.

It's a smaller retinue than he usually takes, although not by much. There are six guards assembled. He's a little surprised to see Vyk and Mako among that number, considering they're both what Charis has come to recognize as some of Rafel's inner circle, some of the most highly-trained and deadly members of the syndicate.

None of them are wearing their helmets yet, though they're all carrying them. This means Charis gets a full view of the way Kat is watching him.

He knows what he looks like, of course. The outfit he's chosen for the occasion is a tight-fitting crop top under a fitted jacket with opaque white sleeves and a translucent body. The looser, jogger-style pants he's wearing shimmer slightly in the light.

The thing Kat is looking at, though, is the set of three platinum chains between the hem of his shirt and his waistband. They're paired with a thick chain at his neck and two lighter ones at each wrist over each of the tight sleeves of his jacket, but Kat isn't looking at those.

His eyes are *so* dark. Once again, Charis feels himself blush. He forces himself to look away, and when they all load into the transport, he sits on the end of one of the wraparound bench seats next to Leon. He doesn't feel Kat looking at him as much

after that, though. In fact, the handful of times Charis looks at him on the ride up, Kat looks a little green.

From where Charis is sitting, he can see half a window of sky behind the co-pilot's chair. It's been months since Charis has been off world, and as the craft clears the stratosphere and the wispy clouds thin to nothingness, he lets his head fall back against the wall, watching the sky shift from blue to black until they're past the furthest reaches of the exosphere and he can see their little corner of the world like it's a card table rather than a continent.

There is still ocean on Earth. It wasn't always a long way from there they live now. In fact, the place where they live now was once surrounded by ocean on three of its four sides. Yet another thing Charis has learned in the past week as he'd scoured the off-system between takes at the studio, looking for clues as to where the smoke is coming from.

As Charis had expected, there isn't a lot. Almost certainly nothing Kat hasn't seen before. There had, however, been an anonymous warning on a years-old forum post not to carry queries about it to the mainframe—one he'd almost forgotten about, but which came to mind again suddenly as Charis thought about why they were going up at all.

He looks over at Kat. Kat's eyes are closed, but he doesn't look as green anymore. Without the friction of air against the craft's outer body, the transport's flight path smooths out until it feels like they're just floating above the earth's surface, suspended in time.

Before long, Arkana comes into view. Charis can tell immediately that most of the people in this craft have never

been up before when most of the craft's occupants suddenly spring out of their seats and crowd around the two pilot chairs, watching the approach as the transport gets closer and closer to the hulking form of the off-world. Out of his peripheral vision, Charis sees Leon and Vyk, who'd stayed in her seat at the back of the transport, look at each other. Vyk is even almost smiling.

Arkana is shaped like a huge bicycle wheel: an outer ring with hundreds of sky bridges stretching between it and the island in the center, which is also connected to the outer ring by several much larger and wider bridges that people actually live and do business on. With the exception of the forest, the outer ring is where most of the things that keep the rest of Arkana alive are found: food and energy production, water and oxygen recirculation, manufacturing and recycling plants. There are also entire massive sections of it that are said to be parts of the mainframe, though the number of people who have access to those areas is tiny.

Arkana is dozens of kilometers across. The part of it they're going to land in is close to the center island, and Charis sees Kat grab the edge of his seat with both hands as the false guards flying the craft order everyone to sit down again while they conduct proximity operations, then wait for Arkana's plasma shields to retract enough to let them in.

The shields serve two purposes. One is to protect the station from flying space objects: whatever they come into contact with from outside is vaporized instantly. The second is to deter illicit entrances. The shields aren't quite impenetrable if you have the right equipment, but they're pretty close.

The shields are also only visible when they're moving. Charis sees the vaguely blueish shimmer as a hole big enough to let the transport through opens, then closes again. Once they've docked, a zone control agent with an ultraviolet hand comes onto the craft, confirming everyone's identities against a list in his monitor before the guards put their helmets on and file out.

Charis and Leon are the last of them. The guards form a semicircle around them as people Charis vaguely recognizes as agency staff shepherd them along through two inner airlocks to where a huge electric limousine is hovering just off the ground at the end of the skybridge, its doors already open.

"God*damn,* I love being best friends with a celebrity!" Leon practically shouts. He's speaking Arkane, now, and the sudden sound of Leon's grounder accent throws Charis momentarily until he remembers that he, too, needs to switch. One of the agency staff shoots a look at Leon, but he isn't paying attention. "Remind me why we don't come up more often? Because I'll gladly take this star treatment off your hands if you don't want it—"

"You know I hate it here," Charis whispers out the side of his mouth, also in Arkane, trying not to let his lips move. Leon just laughs.

Unlike the transport, the top half of the limo is nearly entirely glass. It's mirrored on the outside so people can't see in, but they can see out, and Charis feels a little squeeze in his gut as they pull up to the venue through long lines of fans waiting to get inside.

His music was never supposed to be a big deal. Music was something he'd picked up after his parents died, a safe place to

put his seemingly bottomless grief and heartbreak when it threatened to overwhelm him. It still amazes Charis that this many people want to come to the same place just to hear him sing. And when he sees his agent making a beeline for him as they step out of the limo, he tells her as much.

"*Dejaaa.* There are so many people here! Didn't we say this was going to be small—?"

The wide vowels and harsh consonants of Arkane feel weird on his tongue. Arkane is technically Charis's native language, but it's been so long since he's had to speak it a lot that it feels strange to switch. On the ground, most people speak the common language, including most Sacrosancts, at least outside of school and certain formal occasions and holidays.

His agent laughs. Indeja is shorter than him by at least a full head, though it's less of a gap today with her platform heels, her long black hair stick-straight and perfectly sleek where it falls down her back. She's wearing all white, of course, a smart, close-fitted dress with a deep cutout in the back, the bottom tip of which shows a flash of rich brown skin below the hem of her cropped blazer.

Deja hooks her arm through Charis's as they start walking, completely ignoring both the guards and Leon. "Doll, I don't think you realize how much people like you. It's been *months* since you've done a live, the people are hungry."

"I keep telling him that, he won't listen to me," Leon grumbles.

It's actually not true, either, but the lie falls out of Leon's mouth so effortlessly that for a moment, Charis cannot fathom how he didn't realize the sheer number of secrets Leon has

been keeping from him until the last few weeks. It's easy to spot a lie amidst truth, much harder to do so amidst other lies. Leon is a natural actor.

Deja laughs again and glances back at him, gesturing with her head for him to join them in the front of the group. "You can blame Xalia, though. She took one look at your proposal and said, quote, 'What is this, closet karaoke? No, absolutely not. A triumphant return should be a *spectacle.*'"

Charis resists the urge to run a hand over his face. Deja's imitation of Xalia's deep, dramatic voice is a little *too* accurate.

It's slow going getting inside. Deja steers Charis along the lines of fans on either side of the carpet, signing a few things here and there that are safe for him to sign with heat rather than ink. Then they're inside. The event is being held at a mall. And to Charis's surprise, the entire entryway is almost entirely clear of people.

"We brought you in a side door," Deja says with a wink. "Your venue, *our* production values. This thing sold out in five minutes, but we wanted to make sure people had the chance to see you."

Again, Charis's stomach drops. Leon shoots him a knowing grin, and a quick flash of annoyance at his best friend quickly dispels the butterflies.

It's funny, though, what happens when Charis sees *his* crowd. There's something different about seeing the crowd at a show. A crowd anywhere else is just a bunch of people, but the people gathered in front of the stage are the ones he writes to. They're behind a bunch of enormous curtains right now, but

Charis can see them through gaps in the fabric as Deja leads the group behind the stage.

Charis feels a particular gaze heavy on his back as his manager greets him with a hug. “Oh baby it’s so good to see you,” Xalia says over his shoulder, then steps back and holds his wrists as she looks him over. “Look at you! You tell me you’re not growing anymore but I swear you’re more handsome every time I see you.”

Without missing a beat, Xalia brings a hand to his hair as she arranges some of his curls. Xalia is even more of a mother hen than Karra, and he’s long since learned that the best way to respond to this kind of thing is just to let it happen, not that he really minds that much. Xalia is one of the only good things about coming off world.

“Careful, *ate*, if you butter him up too much, he won’t come back for a year,” Deja calls over her shoulder from where she’s talking to someone Charis knows to be a producer. He turns to Xalia.

“Are we broadcasting this?”

Xalia laughs, full-bodied and warm, and squeezes the wrist she’s still holding before she lets go. “Do you really have to ask? Of course we are. The people want you, Charis. They *miss* you. And speaking of! Here, take this before he starts talking your ear off—”

Xalia hands him the earpiece he’ll wear on stage, and Charis carefully fits it into the ear opposite his comms link with the guards. A couple of guards chatter and wisecrack in the

common language about Xalia's remark into their headsets, voices low enough not to be heard over the crowd noise.

Charis wants to tell them to be quiet. Most Arkanene children learn the common language in school in case they ever have business on Earth, but speaking anything other than Arkane on Arkana is a massive red flag.

Still, they've done a good job melding into the background. With people constantly talking to him, Charis can't hear what they're saying very clearly, but he does hear Vyk tell them to shut up.

Kat has barely taken his eyes off Charis. Charis can feel it. With how opaque the guard helmets are from outside—even to Sacrosanct eyes—that stare is the only way Charis can tell which guard is Kat. At the next person who approaches him, the volume on that stare doubles, and Charis sees Kat and Tauran look right at each other before Tauran turns to Charis, already smiling enough for his dimples to show.

He reaches for Charis's hand, which Charis accepts as Tauran pulls him into a hug.

"That guard is watching you really intensely, they must be new," his senior teases in his ear, squeezing around Charis's shoulders once before stepping back.

Tauran, who is dressed in a glittering white suit with nothing underneath but a heavy pendant of a dragon holding a crystal ball, is a few years older than him, and has had a similar career trajectory to Charis, with the exception of having gone through the agency's idol training program. Tauran had started off in a

group, but he—in Xalia's words—likes to be the center of attention too much to be just one member of a band.

Charis doesn't disagree with that sentiment, but he likes Tauran. Tauran has always been nice to him. Even when other agency recruits his own age had made fun of Charis for his lack of idol training.

"Don't mind them. They're jealous of natural talent," Tauran had told him after his debut concert. Tauran had been his mentor for it—it hadn't been a *complete* disaster, but Charis knew he'd forgotten enough of his choreography that anyone paying attention would notice.

That was nearly five years ago. Now, Charis glances up at Tauran, the only person around them right now who is taller than him other than Mako, hoping his smile is innocent.

"Are they? I didn't notice."

This feels weird. Lying feels weird. Charis doesn't like it, and already he can tell he's bad enough at it that he should really stick to the truth. The look Tauran answers him with confirms this.

"Honey, everyone loves you. You can't look around right now and tell me you don't know that."

Charis blushes at this, smoothly changing the subject.

"I think we're about to start, are you going to stay?"

Tauran rolls his eyes, shaking his head in mock exasperation.

“Of *course* I am. I was barred from the recording room all last week for some secret, I had no idea that meant our little nightingale was coming home to roost!”

Charis laughs a bit, using every bit of his willpower not to turn around. “I don’t know about home.”

Charis is one of the few artists at their label who writes in both Arkane and the common language. His thought, when he’d made that stipulation in his contract at the age of 15 before signing with them, had been to make sure everyone who wanted to hear his music could enjoy it equally, though it’d had the unintended side effect of making Charis a celebrity in both worlds. Some at the label judged him for it—including Tauran, though Tauran only ever ribbed him for it in jest.

Tauran squeezes his shoulder. His smile is indulgent as he leans in closer, speaking into Charis’s ear. “You know as well as I do that you don’t belong down there, little nightingale. Now get out there, go remind everyone why they love you.”

He swats Charis’s ass. Charis laughs and makes a rude gesture as he climbs the stairs to the stage.

The crowd is already screaming, but their screams triple in volume as Charis takes the stage. He doesn’t face them at first, instead making the rounds with his musicians—Artim is already wearing his bass, so Charis just shakes his hand, but Piscaya pulls him in for a quick hug and slap on the back before he slings his guitar over his neck with a flourish, his smile huge and infectious. His drummer, Antea, is too short for a full hug over her kit, so she high-fives Charis with one hand and twirls one of her sticks in the other before nodding toward the crowd with her chin.

One of his guitars has already been set up, and Charis slings it on as he switches on his headset, picking out a few notes to check the tuning. Someone has already tuned it for him—probably Piscaya.

It's time to go, then. He nods at the sound tech.

A beat later, the lights in the venue dim. The crowd's volume picks up again. Charis steps up to the mic.

"Wow, it's good to see you all. It's been a while!"

More screams. Charis waits for them to ebb.

"I have to confess something: I've been in a bit of a creative fugue for a while. My last record was almost two years ago—I thought I'd run out of stories to tell you, and I just didn't know where to go from there."

He pauses dramatically. The crowd quiets—someone with a female voice shouts *I love you*, though Charis can't tell from where in the crowd. So he smiles at everyone.

"Recently some things have happened that broke me out of that. And now it's like I can't stop. Because I know for sure there's at least one more, and it's like nothing you've ever heard from me before. You all who are here today are hearing it first."

The crowd screams again.

"So here's the first single off our new record *Midnight Dreaming*—this is *Anatomy of a Daydream*. I hope you like it!"

Charis's heart races a bit at what he's about to do. Without Charis's knowledge or say-so, an extremely melodramatic holographic backdrop of swirling colors emerges behind him, along with the single's animated cover art. Charis resists the urge to roll his eyes: Xalia wasn't kidding about the production values. The intro has started, though, so there's no time to be annoyed with it.

And anyway, as soon as he starts singing, the rest of the world melts away.

Anatomy of a Daydream is the third song Charis has written in the last couple of weeks, and the one Charis had been astonished to see Xalia choose from among those three as his first comeback single, considering the intro and bridge are written in the common language, not Arkane. When she'd explained her selection, though, it had made a certain level of sense. The song is about not being able to see what's going on around you so that it feels like you're always in a dream, never quite knowing what's real.

"Think of it like rebirth," Xalia had said as she'd handed the demo off to a producer before Charis could protest. "You're a wonderful storyteller, but this one? This is more *you* than almost anything I've ever seen you write."

The beginning of the track is very ethereal, mostly an electronic track that Aya, Tim, and Tea play their parts in sync with. Charis closes his eyes as he sings the intro, deliberately *not* watching the crowd just yet.

As the second half of the verse kicks in, Charis shifts to Arkane, and the energy kicks up—only to stop again, leaving only Charis's clean, clear near-falsetto heavy with reverb over the

barest synth. He'd wanted this part, this first iteration of the chorus to *feel* like a dream, and as he performs it, it does.

As soon as the chorus is over, the energy level doubles. Tea is aggressive on the drums, and by the time the second chorus drops, all three of the musicians are as caught up as Charis is. The spell has been woven.

At one point, Charis moves out as far as he can on the catwalk of the stage and drops to his knees. The barricade is too far away to be able to reach any of his fans, but he makes like he's trying anyway—by the time he's back on his feet for the last chorus, people are jumping.

Charis thanks the crowd again. He feels electric. *This*—this feeling—*this* is why he puts up with everything else the music industry requires of him.

Tauran intercepts him as he's coming down off the stage.

"*Velcharis,* are you going more rock? I've never heard anything like that from you before!"

Tauran almost said his name like he's scolding Charis. Charis shrugs, but he doesn't stop moving. "I've been bored lately, I wanted to try something new," he says.

"I bet you have." Tauran glances at Kat as Charis rejoins them, then toward the stage.

Charis sees that look. There's something unsettling in it, something Charis chalks up to the fact part of the song is in the common language, given Tauran's open disdain for everything Earth-related. But Tauran is speaking again before Charis can

think much more on it. “Uh oh. Xalia looks like she’s about ready to skin someone if they mess up her schedule, you’d better get over there.”

Once again, time blurs. The signing is set up so that Charis’s merch is laid out on a long, elegant table people are meant to pass by before they get to Charis, who is at a smaller, bar-height table with Xalia and Deja, his retinue posted behind and beside him. He likes to briefly talk with everyone who wants to talk to him, not just say hi in passing, and Xalia manages to make it through about half the signing line before she bugs him about needing to speed things up.

Charis doesn’t *exactly* ignore her, but he also has no intention of giving anyone in this line short shrift. He takes a lot of photos with fans, including a lot where people touch him or get close, and it’s like they don’t even see Kat or the other guards, the way they move into Charis’s space without any regard for them at all.

Charis feels them, though. Kat has been at his side almost since the signing started. He hasn’t said anything since—*wow, basically since they left the compound,* Charis realizes suddenly, which was hours ago now—but there are little things in the way he stands and moves that give him away if you know what to look for.

Which Charis does. The way Kat looks when he fights has been permanently stamped on Charis’s brain since the marauder attack a few weeks ago. There are little pieces of that in his posture now, almost like he wants to get between Charis and anyone who tries to touch him.

“Careful, you’re drawing attention,” Charis nearly whispers as the person he has just finished talking with moves on. He knows Kat can hear him—the smallest shift of Kat’s helmet toward him, then away. He doesn’t back off after that, but he doesn’t not, either.

And then, after what feels simultaneously like a year and like no time at all, the end of the line nears.

It happens almost in slow motion. Charis leans in for a photo with a couple of girls perhaps a year or two younger than him, completing a hand heart with one of them. Just after the camera goes off, Charis locks eyes with the last person in line as the girls are ushered on.

“I’m sorry about this,” Charis says under his breath in the common language, then turns off his comms link.

He feels Kat still for a second beside him before the last person comes up to him. The young man is a little underdressed in his white t-shirt and ripped white jeans, his only accessory a chain necklace that falls to just below his collarbone. Not that Charis judges him for it. The man smiles a bit sheepishly as he walks up to Charis and sets one of the souvenir demo tapes his agency has put together for this release down on the table in front of him.

“Do you mind if we do a photo first?”

“Not at all,” Charis answers, making room at his side.

Suddenly, there’s a noise like a loud *whoosh*ing of blood in Charis’s ears as his vision slows. Some people start screaming. The man is ripped from Charis’s side instantly as the ring of

family guards closes around Charis, plasma guns drawn, and Charis looks down to see a knife sticking out of his side.

Bad aim, he thinks, then collapses.

There's a sudden whorl of movement around the guards, sounds and shouts that sound like they're coming from underwater. The next beat, Charis registers that someone already has him in their arms. He doesn't have to ask to know that it's Kat. As the room spins, even through at least four layers of clothing, he feels their heartbeat through his shoulder.

Strong, he thinks. Or maybe says. He's not sure.

"Hold on, Angel. Stay with me. Please," he hears Kat plead.

"Okay," Charis answers.

And then he passes out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next couple of hours are excruciating. Kat had nearly clashed with venue security while the paramedic team loaded an unconscious Charis into a medical transport. Vyk had gotten in front of Kat before Kat could start leveling every Arkane swear he knew at them. But he, Leon, and the rest of the guards would follow behind the transport with a police escort, and while it wasn't the same as having his own eyes on Charis, Kat felt better being able to keep the transport in sight.

When they'd arrived to the nearest medical clinic, Kat had followed the paramedics unprompted, pretending not to understand when they made rude comments about his presence in Arkane. They'd apparently pulled the knife out and staunched the bleeding on the way in, but they waited until Charis was in a clinic bed and linked to an IV before reviving him.

Now, Kat is still at Charis's side in the nearly empty medbay, the only one of their retinue who is, aside from Leon. The rest of the guards are either outside in the hall or guarding the back entrance, making sure no one unexpected comes in or out.

"For what it's worth, if the man *was* trying to kill you, he had terrible aim," the ship doctor says. He's a man in probably his late fifties with the world's most forgettable face, and Kat is physically grabbing his own wrist to stop himself from punching it. "You'll likely be sore for a week or so, and don't try to lift anything heavy until you no longer feel pain. But between your monitor and your body's natural healing, it shouldn't even leave a scar."

Kat is watching Charis's face, like he has been for the last several minutes, ever since the doctor arrived. For some reason, Kat would swear he just saw a flash of disappointment.

"Is that what that stuff you're putting on it now does?"

Charis's voice is quiet. Having sported a similar wound himself for the last several weeks, Kat knows very well that it must hurt like hell to talk right now.

The nurse shakes his head. "No. This is for pain, and also to help stimulate your body's natural healing processes. This needs to dry completely before we do the scar cream."

"You can just leave it with me, I can do it," Charis says. The doctor and the nurse look at each other. "Seriously. Thank you so much for your help, but I'm in good hands."

There's a beat. The nurse is looking at the doctor as though for guidance. The doctor clears his throat.

"Velcharis, I am a doctor, not a security expert. But this man was able to get past six of your guards. You may want to re-evaluate whether you're in as good of hands as you think you are."

Kat feels a hot flash of rage at this. Suddenly, he's *very* thankful for the guard uniform, how it masks whatever look of abject fury must be on his face right now.

Much more surprising is the anger which crosses Charis's face at those words. Even Leon looks affronted, though no one is looking at him right now.

“I’ll discuss it with my security team,” Charis answers, as diplomatically as can be expected. He thanks the doctor formally. “*Magaling kero shansat*, thank you for your help. But I really just want to get home.”

The doctor nods once with a noncommittal *hm,* but credit where credit is due: the man knows a dismissal when he hears one. The nurse hesitates a moment, then gets out a roll of bandages.

“I can do that too,” Charis says. The nurse freezes in place and looks up at Charis, his smile trying hard to be deferential. Kat knows exactly what’s going on here, though.

“Velcharis, you really shouldn’t move around too much just yet,” comes his gentle answer.

The nurse is probably three or four fingers shorter than Kat, but slighter, long-limbed with deft musician’s fingers, light brown hair, dark eyes, and a sweet face. Kat really wants to break his wrists.

“I’ve got it, man, it’s good,” Leon says to the nurse from where he’s sitting on a counter across the room. “Dunno how much time you’ve spent on Earth, but we do things a little rougher down there. You have no idea how many times I’ve put this guy’s ass back together after he’s fallen off a roof or some shit—”

Kat walks around the end of the bed, standing between the nurse and the door. The nurse looks between him and Leon and Kat sees the moment the understanding registers in the nurse’s eyes, because he practically shoots to his feet again, leaving the bandages on the table where he’d found them.

“I see. If you all know what you’re doing, then—Velcharis, it was an honor to meet you.”

He gives a quick bow and turns to follow the doctor out the back door.

“What’s your name?” Charis asks before the nurse has managed more than a few paces. Kat resists the urge to tap his foot in impatience.

The nurse smiles. He does, objectively, have a nice smile, Kat supposes. “Ivie,” he says, then blanches at Kat’s look, correcting to his full, formal name. “Orivie.”

“Ivie,” Charis repeats. “I’ll remember that. Thank you again.”

The nurse nods and leaves.

As soon as the door is shut, Leon jumps down off the counter. “Man, I thought that dude would never leave. Charis, I know you don’t notice these things, but that nurse has seriously been eye fucking you for like, the last thirty minutes.”

“He has not,” Charis answers, trying to sit up.

Kat is immediately at his side, one hand under Charis’s back. “Don’t move.”

Charis glares at him, but there’s no malice in it. “I’m sorry, *which* of us drove a manual transmission rock crawler across several boulder fields immediately after being stabbed *twice* by desert marauders less than a month ago?”

“Wait a minute, Chay, you were *there* for that—?”

Kat ignores his cousin. “That wasn’t as deep. It just bled a lot. This is a *real* stab wound, Charis, and you need to be careful how you move or you’ll bleed internally—”

“*Speaking of,*” Leon says in an outside voice, cutting off anything else either Kat or Charis had been about to say. Leon turns to Charis, then, a hand on his hip. “*I* was under the impression that you would be *faking* being stabbed, sir. Since when did the plan turn to you *actually almost dying*—”

“I wasn’t almost dying,” Charis grumbles.

For several seconds, Kat is *sure* he misheard. As impasse falls between Charis and Leon, though, silence falls with it, and Kat slides his hand out from under Charis’s back and takes off his guard helmet.

“Oh shit,” Leon suddenly says, his eyes wide. “Man. Okay. You two figure it out. I’m going to go make sure Mako doesn’t fuck up the pod configuration.”

Almost as soon as he’s done speaking, Leon is gone.

“What…medbay are we in?” Charis asks after a few beats of silence.

“North Central,” Kat says, his voice nearly inaudible.

“Which one?”

“Capricorn. Like you said.”

He isn’t looking at Charis. He’s standing at Charis’s bedside, his hands spread wide enough apart on the edge that he’s bending forward a bit, holding the guard helmet up by the rim in one

hand. The concrete fact he's trying to hold onto is that the different sectors of Arkana are named after constellations, but the charts and maps he's spent the last three weeks memorizing are slipping out of his brain like sand.

Kat's heart is racing. He isn't even sure where to start. He can't look at Charis, not yet, not when his stomach is already in knots and the sight of Charis's injury feels like a spike of guilt in his own chest.

"Angel," he says, his voice even quieter than before. "You *planned* this?"

When Charis doesn't answer right away, Kat looks up to find a look of pure defiance on his face. "I did," he says.

"Who else knew?"

He isn't proud of the way his voice is shaking. After a beat, the hard look in Charis's eyes softens to something more like what Kat is used to.

"Everyone but you, though they all thought the same as Leon."

Kat flinches at this. "*Why*—"

"It's actually simple," Charis continues, quickly cutting Kat off. "We need an actual medbay for this to work, and I needed *your* reaction to be convincing. Capricorn North Central is an old medic station—barely used anymore, but it's the closest to the venue, and I'm famous enough that we're the only ones here." A little bit of the defiance is settling in Charis's eyes again. "Does that answer all of your questions?"

No, Kat thinks. His head is currently freewheeling, trying to catch up with the implications of Charis sustaining a life-threatening injury *on purpose* just so Kat could get a skin monitor.

Because it isn't just this, either. It's everything being connected to him has done to Charis. It's *he himself* calling Yen and his thugs on Charis in the Boneyard. It's Charis getting dragged into his family's underground circle with no choice, then nearly getting killed by desert marauders on *his* watch. To say nothing of the hell he's been going through during the last three weeks of reckoning with his fate *alone,* or close to it, since the number of people he can talk to about all this is so ridiculously small—

There's a hand on his. Charis's fingers brush over the back of Kat's hand, and it's then that Kat notices the white-knuckled grip he'd had on the bedsheets. He eases his grip, but doesn't move his hand, because Charis will stop touching him if he does.

"I see I made the right choice," Charis says.

Kat's head snaps up. "What?"

"You care about me," Charis answers, running a finger along the tracks of veins on the back of Kat's hand. "I had a feeling that you'd burn this station to the ground to protect me if that's what it took. Which is the other reason we're alone in Capricorn North Central, isn't it?"

There is absolutely nothing Kat can say to this. For a long moment, Kat just looks at Charis in astonishment—because *yes,* while the Arkanene medic team and station nurses had worked to stabilize Charis before the doctor arrived, Kat had personally

overseen the clearing out of everyone else in this building other than the family guards and Leon. And when they were done, he had cleared everyone out again but the most necessary medical staff, citing Charis's need for privacy.

The word in Kat's mind is *dumbstruck.* Never, not a single time in his 25 years of life has he ever underestimated someone as much as he's underestimated Charis.

Kat leans forward and kisses him.

It's right. *Instantly,* it's right. A beat later, after Charis does not shove him off, Kat gently cups a hand under Charis's jawline and tips his face up and kisses him properly, leaning hard on the hand still holding the helmet so he doesn't fall over. Charis makes a noise against his mouth that Kat wants to *eat*, one hand coming up around the back of Kat's neck and into his hair and squeezing a bit before he pulls away.

Charis's soft grunt of pain brings Kat immediately back to the present.

"As into this as I am—and I'm *very* into this—we really need to get you started if we're going to finish this mission. Skin monitors take a long time to install and we only have guard clearance for another few hours."

"You didn't plan for a buffer?"

"I didn't want to linger. I hate Arkana." The soft strokes of Charis's fingers through Kat's hair belie this sentiment, but Kat won't protest. "Besides, I knew I'd be in good hands. You're the most individually dangerous person I've ever met. If you're this

good *now,* I can't wait to see what you'll be like with a monitor."

The way that sounds is harsher than Charis realizes. Kat has already seen how little Charis cares about the class system. Still, something long ingrained in Kat balks at the idea of Charis seeing him as better than he is now just because of some tech under his skin.

"Where is that brain taking you?" Charis asks.

Kat actually, physically, bites his lip. He's promised Charis he wouldn't lie to him, but the truth is so embarrassing.

"Do you only want me because I'm getting a monitor?"

Charis is not drinking anything right now, but if he were, he looks like he'd have spat his drink. Charis laughs, then swears, fingers gentle just above his wound.

"Fuck, *ow,* laughing hurts," Charis says. "Can you help me wrap this? I don't know that I can get it tight enough on my own. When we're done, I'll tell you why that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Kat raises a brow, trying and failing to hide a smile. "Scar cream first?"

Charis glares, but there's no malice in it. "*Absolutely not.* Don't even think about it. And we're on the clock right now, so I'm not going to get into the massive thing I have for scars—"

Kat kisses him again, swallowing whatever Charis was about to say before it went straight to his dick. Charis's little contented sigh when they part again does not help.

"Which one of us is supposed to be more dangerous?" Kat asks as he accepts the bandages from Charis, then helps him to the edge of the bed and carefully straddles his legs, mindful of his wound. He directs Charis to hold one end in place just around the curve of his waist.

A lithe, narrow waist he would *very* much like to hold with both hands as he—

Focus, he orders himself.

"Oh, I didn't say that," Charis teases, then bites his lip. He looks up at Kat from under his lashes. "Next time I'm under you, though, you should definitely take your shirt off."

Kat pulls his hand back once Charis has the bandage in place before he gives in to the temptation to run his hand up Charis's bare back. T he hospital staff had taken Charis's bloodied shirt—Arkanene medical protocol, apparently, and hadn't brought another after Charis had told them once he woke up that he wanted to go back to Earth right away.

Kat mimes dropping his face to Charis's shoulder and groans. "Work with me, Chay," he nearly begs.

Charis manages to stifle an audible laugh, but it still makes it into his eyes.

Once Charis is bandaged, Kat helps him into the room where the pod has been set up. Aside from Kat, Leon and two of the

remaining six guards are in here, and Kat isn't the least bit surprised to see those two are Vyk and Mako.

Mako and Leon are standing by the control panel, configuring the machine based on instructions Eris is feeding into Leon's skin monitor from the ground.

"Once that runs, find the citizen bank," he hears Eris say from where she's on speaker through a holoscreen suspended above Leon's monitor.

"What does that look like?" Mako asks—before Eris can answer, Leon nudges him out of the way.

"I've got it. Hang on."

"The name you're looking for is Andromichal Aravanus Lupina."

It's a good Arkanene name, Kat thinks. Arkanene names are like miniature human geographies: a person's individual, formal name is linked to their sector of birth, while their second and third names are linked to their parents' sectors. Names aren't shared further than two generations, though, a tradition that underscores the importance that Sacrosancts place on their collective identity as opposed to family ties. Kat's are apparently linked to Andromeda, Ara, and Lupus.

Vyk looks at Kat and Charis when they enter. She's leaning against the wall opposite the door, helmet on the floor at her feet while she sips at something in a translucent white bottle.

"Where did you get that?" Kat asks. Vyk points toward a small fridge in the corner of the room.

Charis squeezes Kat's side a bit, stopping him.

"Not yet. After the installation. It'll be smoother if you go in fasted," Charis says.

Kat doesn't pout at this, but he does feel fatigue creeping up on him like a wave. It's been a very long few hours.

"Huh," Leon says from in front of the control panel. "It says he's already in here."

"…That's impossible," Eris answers.

"See for yourself," Leon says, then taps his temple.

There's a long beat before Eris answers.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would he already be in the citizen bank? He's not Sacrosanct, he doesn't have the blood."

"Beats me," Leon says, then taps his temple again.

"Hang on, put your camera back on," Eris says.

Leon complies. Kat helps Charis into a chair nearby, and he sees in his peripheral vision that Vyk does not miss the way Charis lets his hand slide nearly all the way down Kat's arm as they part.

Mako makes room for Kat beside the control panel. "You're already in the bank," he says.

"So I hear."

“This is so weird. The program I gave you is designed to put him in the citizen bank…keep it on hand, but his card looks legitimate.”

“It has to be, the mainframe doesn’t allow forgeries,” Leon answers.

It’s easy to forget sometimes that Leon is almost as good an engineer as Eris. Still, if they’re right, there’s something very strange about this.

And yet, when Leon switches the screen back to what is apparently Kat’s ID card in the mainframe’s citizen bank, Kat sees his own slightly-younger face looking back at him.

“Well…okay then. I guess we’re doing this.”

“You ready?” Mako asks.

“No,” Kat answers honestly. “But we’re already here, and we’re not going to get this chance again.”

With that, Kat begins to strip out of his guard uniform.

He’s already been briefed about what this will involve. Once Kat is inside, the first thing that will happen is that the pod will introduce a gas that’s designed to switch off Kat’s pain receptors, but without otherwise numbing him to touch. After that, the upper layers of the skin of Kat’s forearm will be temporarily lifted away while the monitor is inserted, then immediately put back and fused together. Genuine Arkanene monitors feel like real skin once they’re installed.

Once it's in, the pod will then introduce some substance into his arm that will initiate the process of the monitor linking up with Kat's nervous system. From what Eris has explained, by the time the installation is complete, there won't be a single neuron left in Kat's body that the monitor hasn't synced with.

Daunting doesn't even begin to describe this. Rafel's monitor is nothing like this, and it certainly had not been painless to install.

The reason he has to be awake, though, is because one of the last things the monitor will do during the initial installation is link with his brain. When he sleeps tonight, then—which does not have to happen in the pod—it will link with his sleep cycle, and then the installation will be complete.

By the time he has finished undressing, Leon has already configured the pod to begin the installation. Kat opens the lid and climbs in.

Already, this is strange. The white carbon fiber of the pod is cold against his skin. There is a series of slots in the left wall.

"See you on the other side," Leon says, then closes the lid.

The lid is transparent, but Kat immediately feels claustrophobic. This isn't helped at all when a series of cuffs pop out of the sides of the pod and over his ankles, wrists, and waist, adjusting automatically to the dimensions of Kat's body. His left arm gets four: two above the elbow, two below. The latter two, which are thinner than the rest, are placed as close to his elbow and palm as they can get.

He can't hear anything from outside. At first, he sees Leon and Mako's faces near the control panel. Before long, though, he can't see anything either as the pod fills with odorless white gas.

Kat doesn't go numb, exactly. Like Eris said, he can still feel the smooth texture of the pod where it touches his skin, can still feel the cuffs where they're holding him in place. But his entire body relaxes so much that it's as though Kat is a liquid melting into the bottom of the pod. After a minute or so, though, when his heart rate picks up at the sight of a scalpel coming out of a slot on the wall, he feels no pain when a needle enters his shoulder, only the strange, foreign feeling of something entering his body that isn't supposed to be there. A few seconds later, his heart rate calms again.

The blade skips forward and back a few times, a bit like the arm of a 3D printer, almost like it's scanning something. It probably is. Its trajectory through the slot in the wall isn't quite silent—Kat has spent far too long around mechanical things not to notice the sounds of a well-oiled machine, and every sound in the pod echoes off every wall.

Kat watches the pod makes its initial cut.

It's strange to see. It looks like it's happening to someone else, like it can't possibly be his arm that's being operated on. This can't possibly be his body. He isn't even sure he has a body. But the same strange feeling as when the needle had entered his skin follows, reminding Kat that he does—there's no pain, but something else is happening that isn't supposed to happen.

Yet, he isn't feeling anxious anymore. The pod's robotic surgeon is efficient and clean, and the first cut is perfect. When

it's done, before the blood can even well up under his skin, Kat watches as a beam of what looks like a white laser shoots out of the wall from a slot closer to his arm. It passes under his skin—under the top layers, leaving only a thin, film-like layer above the subcutaneous skin and muscle and instantly, painlessly cauterizing the wounds it leaves behind.

Things stop, then. The scalpel retracts, as does the laser, pulling away from Kat's arm before snapping into the wall and retreating back through the little slots until Kat can no longer see them. He's dimly aware of mechanical clicking and whirring just behind his head, but Kat can't turn his head enough to see it. Even if he wanted to, it's too hard to move.

There's one final sound, so tiny that Kat isn't even sure how he can hear it: the sound of something breaching the surface of water. Water is a scarce enough resource on Earth that Kat has never been surrounded by enough of it to make that sound. But something in his hindbrain recognizes it instantly, and the feeling that floods over Kat next is one of being suspended in enough water to float in, the same temperature as his body, muting his senses and enlivening his mind.

Kat watches in wonder as the monitor emerges from the wall. It's translucent, vaguely blue against the stark white of the pod, dripping a little with the last vestiges of whatever liquid it was stored in, and clearly the pod has scanned the dimensions of Kat's body already, as the edges of the monitor are immediately trimmed away to a perfect fit while the scraps are collected on a tray that disappears into the walls of the pod again.

Carefully, almost reverently, a set of several thin, metallic fingers lays the monitor into the cut the pod made on his arm. The two at the top and bottom reach around, then, carefully putting his skin back, making sure it aligns correctly and that his skin and the monitor are flush.

It's strange. It's *so* strange. The foreignness of the monitor under his skin—it feels like an extra layer of something that *isn't supposed to be there*. And it isn't smooth yet, either—Kat can tell it's seated correctly, there aren't any air pockets or anything, but there are clusters of what feel like wires underneath it, pressing into his muscles and tendons in ways that send strange jolts of sensation through his hand, up the underside of his arm, even a bit into his neck.

Even without pain, it's one of the most singularly uncomfortable sensations Kat has ever experienced. It's no small relief, then, when the first thing that happens after the monitor is seated is that it merges with his skin.

It's exactly like he was told it would be, but also not. The monitor doesn't light up yet. For what could well be an hour or more, though, Kat can feel how the monitor is already talking to his body. The first thing the monitor says is to stop its autoimmune response—to stop attacking the monitor like it's a foreign invader. *I come in peace*, it says, spreading out millions of microscopic receptors that latch onto his subcutaneous tissue before moving gently through his skin. It's such an absurd thought that Kat would laugh if he could control his muscles at all.

But his body listens. At first, the monitor is just like an extra layer of skin. Before long, though, it's much more than that,

and little patches of red well up and then dissipate as the monitor continues to calm Kat's immune system. Without the sensation of pain, the process of the monitor fusing with his cells just tingles in a way that's uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

Kat drifts into a semi-conscious dream state. Whatever was in the gas that's keeping his pain receptors switched off is also keeping him awake, so he doesn't actually fall asleep. But it's enough that, when the process of the monitor fusing with his skin is done, Kat's eyes snap open as the process of integration with Kat's nervous system truly begins.

There is no way to describe what this feels like. It starts with little electrical currents between the monitor and the individual neurons that are closest to it. The monitor can't reach for them, so it lures them in. When they connect, he feels a warm tingle down his hand, into his palm, almost like liquid—there's no blood, though. There hasn't ever been any blood. His nerve cells are excited, and a couple of long, liquid seconds after the connection, a warm flash of electricity zips through Kat's entire body and brain as his neurons link together, almost instantly accepting their new second brain.

But the neural link is only the first part. The monitor is, at the end of the day, a *computer,* and every electronic device needs some kind of vector through which to transmit and receive electric signals. It's a symbiotic process, the monitor tells him, unprompted: yes, the monitor will draw power from the electricity his body naturally produces. But the monitor is also a battery of sorts, able to store and re-transmit energy so it doesn't draw too heavily from the stores of energy his body needs.

Better, even, it tells him. It can store *more* energy than his body needs at any given time. Has he ever wondered what it's like to be able to stay awake for three days straight and still perform like he'd just gotten the best sleep of his life?

You are more, it says. *I am you.*

Even without pain, the feel of wires and receptors creeping slowly into his body centimeter by centimeter is like nothing he has ever known it was even *possible* to feel. As the monitor's own receptors link with his neurons, the only way to describe it is that he feels more real than he has ever felt. Every sense, other than pain, is more alive. He feels his cells, his ligaments, his muscles, even his bones with a heaviness he has never felt before as the receptors seep into every part of him, leaving not a single cell untouched.

He wasn't warned about this. He couldn't have been warned about this. *There are some things it is not possible to know without experience, child. Do not be afraid, I will not lead you astray.*

What the hell is that voice? Something inside of him almost laughs.

Have you ever wondered what your own thoughts sound like?

No, Kat thinks. *That's not possible. Your thoughts are inside your head, you can't hear them.*

Nothing is merely possible when everything is given.

Why does this thing sound like a fucking oracle? Is this his life now? Is it too late to stop?

Silence, but there's a clear undercurrent of amusement. Kat turns his head slightly, looking up at the clouds of white gas where they're eddying around in the curved lid of the pod, watching the shapes they make. The thing inside him watches along with him.

Kat has absolutely no idea how long this takes. The transformation moves up his left arm first, then branches out when it reaches his shoulder: part traverses his clavicle and the upper part of his chest, while another part continues down his torso, through his ribcage and core, pelvis, groin, then down his legs and into his feet, starting closer to his skin before moving deeper. It could be minutes or hours.

When the rest of his body is mapped out and remade, the feeling passes down his spine from the root of his neck down, then back up into his brain.

Kat feels his brain even before the change starts to take. It is so, *so* strange, the way the neural link moves up the sides of his neck. It starts in the front, just behind his forehead, and wraps around and inward, then down—slowly, *so* slowly. The slowest it has moved yet by far. Like water sinking into stone rather than into soil.

The first thing he notices is that he can hear what's happening outside the pod, now. There isn't a lot to hear at first—neither Charis nor Leon is very good at sitting still, and Mako is only marginally better. He remembers that these are, in fact, the names of most of the people outside the pod—that there are people outside the pod at all. That it hasn't just been him and his two brains in this strange pool of sensation and awareness since time immemorial.

Someone is drumming their fingers against a solid surface. It's the same tempo as the song Charis performed today, so it's probably Charis. He hears a loud exhale, low voices, a door opening and closing. Feels something almost mechanical pass into his eyes, blacking out his vision for a second until it clears again.

It passes into his brain stem.

The brain stem is what controls the body's autonomous functions, and there is nothing, absolutely *nothing* he has experienced thus far like the sensation of the monitor linking with his heart. He *feels* the connection grab on—feels how his heart wants to skip, to stutter, to throw off the wires, but it can't. Whatever the drug is that's keeping his heart rate steady won't allow it.

Let me, Kat hears.

Kat has always been a fighter, but his heart gives in easily. The monitor links.

After that—again, he has no idea how long it's been—it feels like another hour or more goes by as the pod scans his entire body, making sure the connection took before it prepares to release him again. There are a few, seemingly random floods of pleasant electricity, warmth, and coolness. The gas, which is apparently heavier than Kat realized, feels like velour against his naked skin.

And then, finally—*finally*—the pod lets go. The various implements and scanners that had emerged fold away into the walls, leaving only the thinnest slots behind in the hull of the

pod. Eventually, the lid of the pod clicks open on its own. The remnants of the nerve gas are siphoned away.

Kat sits up. Blinks.

The first things he notices are the colors. Like everything else in the Sacrosanct domain, the medbay is mostly white, aside from a handful of metal appliances and implements. He sees now, though, why Sacrosancts have gravitated toward white as their color of choice: white, his monitor supplies seemingly without prompting, is the combination of all wavelengths of visible light. All he has to do to see the slightest glimmering rainbows over every surface is look at them out of the sides of his eyes.

“How do you feel?”

It’s Charis. Charis is the only one in the room still awake. Mako and Leon are dozing propped up against each other against the outer hull of the pod. Vyk has gone somewhere else, probably to check on the rest of the guards.

Kat is almost disappointed when Charis looks away as Kat climbs out of the pod, blushing a bit. Leon has at least done Kat the favor of already changing before falling asleep, though. Kat finds the clothes he’d selected for himself earlier, which Leon had been wearing, folded neatly on top of the control panel, and he puts them on before walking over to Charis.

His whole body feels strange. *More.* He feels everything, every muscle as it expands and contracts, every fiber of the clothing he’s wearing against his skin. Still no pain—probably the lingering effects of whatever drug was in that gas. Still, he feels like he’s been plugged into a power bank, like he never even

knew before this that his body was running on only a portion of its potential. He feels all of it, now, and then some.

He helps Charis to his feet with both hands, then slides a hand into his hair and kisses him.

Kat lets himself linger this time. He lets himself linger on the feel of Charis's full lips against his, of the way their hips and legs slot together as Kat's arm drops to Charis's lower back, holding Charis as close as he can below his injury. Lets himself lick into Charis's mouth and taste him with his new tongue.

Kat isn't nearly sated when he pulls back, touching his forehead to Charis's. "Angel. How do I *feel*? I feel everything. I feel like I've been asleep my entire life and have only just woken up."

Charis smiles. "That's a good start," he says, and pulls Kat back in for a kiss.

"Ew," Leon protests as he pushes himself up straighter against the hull of the pod, dislodging Mako as he does. Mako startles himself awake. "Are you guys going to be as insufferably gross as Rafel and Karra? Is this just my life now?"

"Don't forget Yen and Petra," Mako supplies, still half asleep.

"Literally *how could I ever,* when they make their weird kink everyone else's problem—"

Charis kisses Kat one more time before lowering his hand, leaning into Kat a bit as he shifts his weight to his uninjured side. Kat can't tell if he did that to troll his friend or because he just felt like it. Either is great, and Kat takes the opportunity

he's been given to wrap his arm carefully around Charis's back, curling his fingers over his hip.

The door opens. Vyk walks in and looks around the room, helmet in hand.

"It's done? And it took?"

"Yes, one newly-cyborg cousin acquired," Leon answers, pushing himself to his feet. He makes for the control panel, shutting off the pod and closing the lid manually. "Can we go now? There is a massage table in the Vizor with my name on it."

"Dibs," Mako says, then puts on his helmet, making for the door.

"I thought you liked it here—what was that noise you were making before we got in the limo?" Charis teases.

Leon bounds up to his friend, looking at first like he's about to clap him on the back until he remembers Charis's injury and stops short, squeezing his shoulder instead. "It's called acting, my friend, you should try it sometime."

He winks and puts on the guard helmet, then follows Mako out the door.

Vyk catches the door before it closes. "Eris has already tripped the disconnection sequence on Leon's monitor. We have fifteen minutes to get back to the hangar."

Charis nods. "Good. I called for an agency car while you were out, it should already be outside."

“And it’ll get us back in time?” Kat asks.

Kat trusts Charis, but Vyk doesn’t seem to yet. Not fully, anyway. Charis doesn’t seem to take this personally.

Charis nods, then grins. “Let’s just say that I’m getting anything I want from them for the foreseeable future, no questions asked. They feel *so* bad right now.”

Even Vyk can’t help but smile a bit at this. She puts on her helmet, then holds the door while Kat helps Charis out of the room.

It’s funny, the way Kat’s brain retained information it had taken in under stress. With his new eyes, the stark, bare white halls of Capricorn North Central look almost *too* real—every bit of relief in the drywall, every grey or brown speckle in the marble of the floor tiles. His body remembers the route to the exit even though he’d been running completely on adrenaline when he’d last walked these halls, when he’d been clearing the building while Charis was unconscious.

Mako and Leon fall into step in front of Kat and Charis, Vyk bringing up the rear. When they pass through another set of guards, Cade and Sonja join their formation to either side of Kat and Charis.

The last guard, Meridian, is holding the station’s outermost door. The streets outside are almost entirely clear of people.

“Crowd control,” Charis says, as though reading his thoughts. It’s less eerie now than it once was.

But what streets they are. The streets of Arkana are paved, even though most transports here don't have wheels. None of the buildings are shelled. There's no dust anywhere. There is even real turf between the sidewalks and the road—it's recently been mowed, and the air is sweet with the smell of cut grass.

There are trees, too, amid the grass. They're small, just a few meters high, with round canopies and the kinds of leaves that change color at certain times of the year, perfectly spaced in neat lines on either side of the street. Outside, the air is bright with what looks like sunlight.

Kat tips his head back. Far, far above, where there should be blue sky, a carbon-grey ceiling stares back at him like the pupil of a giant eye.

The nazar on his back seems to throb. He climbs into the car, helping Charis inside.

The ride to the hangar where the family's off-world transport is still docked is short and silent. The car has no driver, but everyone inside it has been thoroughly briefed about the importance of keeping conversation to a minimum anywhere the mainframe might be listening. A car bound for an off-station hangar is absolutely on that list.

Charis has no qualms about curling into Kat's chest as much as his injury will allow, short ride or not. Only once does he hear Leon make quiet retching noises into his comms link.

As soon as the transport stops, though, Leon is all business. They all are. A couple of guards exit first, then Charis and Kat,

then the rest of their retinue, passing through a set of doors that snap open vertically from center.

Kat feels the moment his monitor is scanned. His face appears on a screen on the wall bearing his ID card—now updated with his current face—followed by a green check. A couple of seconds later, the same happens with Charis.

The guards pass through. And then there's Leon. It seems like everyone holds their breath.

The latency was invisible and imperceptible. There's no way anyone else other than Leon can tell if it's already been tripped or not. If it has, it's entirely possible that Arkana won't let him leave—that it won't let *any* of them leave.

The screen lights up with Leon's face. A couple of seconds later, the green check appears. Everyone collectively lets out a breath.

Until the screen flickers. Once, then what looks like a jagged slash cuts through Leon's ID card on the screen as the card goes from color to grey. Kat's heart rate picks up.

"Shit. Go. Everyone go, get on the transport *now.*"

The second airlock opens just as a ring of red lights starts to pulse like a heartbeat between the two airlocks. The skybridge is down between the second airlock and the door to the transport, which is already open, kept pressurized by a pneumatic ring that's securing it to the skybridge.

Sirens begin to sound. The first airlock slams shut with a violent, metallic *boom.*

“Kat?!”

Fuck, Kat thinks. Charis sounds so scared. He should never feel scared.

“I’ve got you, baby. Hold on.”

He picks Charis up in a bridal carry just as the guards start to sprint down the skybridge.

Mako makes it first, punching in the code on the door and shoving it open before waving people through.

“*Quickly,* before it retracts!”

The guards race down single file, which is as much as the skybridge allows. Kat and Charis are the last to set foot on the family transport—the skybridge begins to retract from the transport door before they’ve quite made it, and, without hesitating a second*,* Kat tightens his grip on Charis and jumps the growing distance. Mako reaches for Charis as he lands, while Vyk grabs Kat by the shirt and yanks him inside, slamming the door closed.

Everyone is breathing hard. Somehow Vyk’s helmet is already off, and she lock eyes with Kat with the unspoken understanding that she has just saved his life.

“Buckle up, kids, we gotta go,” says Leon from the pilot’s chair, helmet already discarded as well as he initiates the release sequence for the pneumatic lock on the door. Leon is technically neither old enough nor licensed to drive an off-world transport, but everyone currently in this boat knows he can do it, and they don’t have time to be picky.

Mako has helped Charis to his feet, and he waits until Kat has taken up his post by Charis again before ditching his own helmet and making for the co-pilot's chair.

"What happened?" Kat hears someone ask.

"Latency tripped as the mainframe was logging my departure. The mainframe thinks something happened to me, that's why it's freaking out like this. Do any of you guys know if Eris can boot up my sim remotely, without me being connected to it?"

Kat doesn't hear the answer. As soon as he and Charis are strapped in, the pneumatic lock disengages and Leon guns the accelerator forward hard enough to knock the wind out of everyone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Okay, but that still doesn’t make sense.”

“You can keep saying that. It doesn’t matter how many times I run this, the answer is the same. When Leon walked through that door, there were nearly two minutes left before the disengagement sequence tripped.”

“He should have already been on the transport,” comes the exasperated voice on the line.

“Yen, he was halfway through the exosphere when I booted up his sim. Unless the mainframe *knew* he was wearing a trip wire, there is *no conceivable reason* the mainframe should have registered his departure as anomalous.”

Eris has been in this chair for a very long time. It’s a nice chair, and she doesn’t mind it, and it’s well-oiled enough that the persistent, ubiquitous dust of the compound keeps the metal in the stem from scraping against itself as she spins in it.

And Ariyen isn’t fucking *listening,* but what else is new.

“I want to hear you say it,” Eris says after several long beats of silence.

There are some days Eris wishes her Sacrosanct princess of a mother, Minoria Cassiopardus Cephera, hadn’t been too much of a free spirit to let herself get knocked up by literally any other Sacrosanct. Being able to root around on the mainframe without hooking a Scaramandis up to her remote access rig would be nice. On the other hand, Sacrosancts have two brains and somehow *still* can’t be bothered to think.

Yen's sigh would have made Eris's mother proud.

"Okay. Then the mainframe knew he was wearing a trip wire. What do we do with that information?"

"*Now,* we start figuring out how it knew."

Working with Yen is actually great, most of the time. Rigged to a sim that mimes the life of an engineer on Arkana, Yen has some *extremely* useful access privileges that no one else in the family's proximity has.

"Okay, let's work backwards. The mainframe didn't care about Kat or Charis."

"So it can't be because of the blood, because then it would have cared about Charis," Eris adds, sliding up to her main terminals again and pulling up the window with the code for Leon's disconnection sequence. She inverts her hands to crack her knuckles.

"Right. And it also doesn't care about me or Karra."

"Having the blood doesn't mean the mainframe logs every disconnect. If it did, no one would use real sims—there would be no point."

Eris scrolls back up through the code for a while before finding where the trip was supposed to register.

"Exactly." There's a crunching sound on the line, like something hitting a transport, then the sound of a lot of wind for a second before Yen claps a hand over the sound receiver on his

monitor. After a couple of beats, he removes it again. *"Sorry about that."*

"Where are you?"

"Classified." Eris rolls her eyes. *"Maybe it has to do with the door."*

"We've already been there, though, right? It didn't care about Kat or Charis."

The only variable that makes any sense right now is distance, of Leon being on Arkana and his sim being on Earth. Even then, though, that shouldn't have mattered at *the moment of disconnect*—it should have been a seamless step between Arkana reading the real Leon one moment and his sim the next.

And it was. Eris sees it right there in the code. There was no skip.

"Unless it was literally the door."

Eris freezes.

"You don't mean someone bugging the door."

There's a long beat, more wind, then a louder crunch, this time followed by what sounds like the human sound of someone getting hit. Hard. Feet skid on gravelly ground, then an engine revs.

Eris decides she doesn't want to know. It's about another minute before Yen speaks again, and he's a little winded when he does.

"Fucking quit *while you're—"* Yen exhales sharply, focusing on Eris again. *"Yeah. If it wasn't a tech thing, then someone was surveilling them."*

"Have we had any run-ins with the Bureau of Obedience lately?"

There's a beat.

"How do you know about the Bureau?"

"Who do you think you're dealing with, Yen? Next question."

Yen lets out a long breath she can hear even with the sound of the road noise. *"Yeah, once. A long time ago. Some twink was undercover and hooked up with Rafel."*

Eris frowns at this as she rolls back up to her computer and opens an off-system search bar. "Why? Rafel is Insignis."

"Beats me. Maybe they were trying to get to Aravan, it's not like half the city doesn't know what Raf was like before Karra."

Eris huffs a laugh as she types in a few queries, each in different windows. "I hope you understand that you have no room whatsoever to slut-shame your cousin."

She runs a sync protocol to connect the searches.

"Excuse me, I am in a long-term, monogamous relationship."

"Says the man with an air-quotes 'multipurpose dungeon' in a fortified underground bunker."

"Don't kink shame."

“I would never. What you do when you’re not at my terminal is none of my business.” The protocol finishes, then an image pops up on her screen. “Oh *fuck.*”

“What?”

Eris screenshots the image and sends it to Yen. “Is that your twink?”

It’s an agency bio. After a few beats, Yen says something under his breath that Eris can’t discern through the road noise.

“Looks like you have a job tomorrow,” Eris says.

“Varaisho,” Yen swears in Arkane. *“Can’t a guy catch a break?”*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Karra is waiting in the hangar when they arrive back to the compound. The second Charis steps out of the transport, Kat sees his eyes go wide as he starts pushing past the guards as they file out.

"*Charis,* what the hell happened to you?!"

Kat glances at Charis as best he can. During the flight down, between Charis's injury and his own hatred of flying, Kat had barely taken his hands off Charis for a single second, and they're still practically flush side by side as Kat helps Charis off the transport.

"You didn't tell him either?"

Charis laughs once, sharp, then clutches his side. "Ow. *No* I didn't tell him—you think *you're* protective of me? Karra would have disabled the transport before we could even take off if he'd known."

Kat raises a brow. "He could do that?"

"He'd find a way."

"Velcharis Lyricus Mensara, what the actual *fuck* happened? And *do not* bullshit me with 'nothing,' I can see with my own eyes that something obviously did."

Charis audibly sighs, then squeezes Kat's right arm, the one without the monitor, where he's holding onto it for support. "I'll handle this. It's better if it's just me. Anyway, you said you needed to talk to your father?"

Kat is so used to feeling dread at the thought of a confrontation with his father that he's momentarily surprised that all he feels is a flash of anger. He nods, then kisses Charis's temple. "I'll try not to be long," he says, stepping past Karra, who takes his place at Charis's side.

"*Ooookay,* I see I missed two things," Kat hears Karra say from across the hangar just before the door closes behind him.

The hall that leads to his father's wing of the compound is dim, reflecting the late hour. Kat doesn't knock.

Aravan Scaramandis is standing with his back to Kat, one hand in his pocket, looking up at something on one of his tall, wooden bookshelves. Before Charis's study, his father's is the only place Kat has ever seen with actual paper books. Trees are so rare now that anything made of paper is exorbitantly expensive. And anyway, technology has long since rendered physical books unnecessary, so they're mostly just status symbols at this point. His father has a couple hundred, though not nearly as many as Charis.

His father has also rolled his shirtsleeves up to just below the elbow. He turns around as Kat closes the door behind him.

"I imagine you have questions," his father says.

His father so rarely has his arms uncovered that the sight of his skin monitor as he takes a sip of whiskey from a crystal glass feels momentarily surreal. He knows, in his head, that his father is Sacrosanct, but even rarer than glimpses of his skin monitor are the number of times Kat has ever seen him wear white, that number being zero.

So it's strange, with his new eyes, to see his father's colorful monitor juxtaposed against the deep maroon of his shirtsleeve. Karra rarely wears white around the family, yes—but Karra also openly and vocally hates being Sacrosanct, at least insofar as it means he gets certain privileges that not everyone has. His father has expressed no such sentiment, but his father has also never, in Kat's active memory, ever taken advantage of his status, at least as long as Kat has been alive.

Kat takes a seat across his father's octagonal table.

There's a small tray of catha cigars stacked neatly along the side of the table nearest the wall. Kat is surprised to find he has absolutely no desire to smoke one.

Kat waits for his father to sit down across from him before speaking. Once he does, his father slides the tray toward himself and selects a cigar, reaching for his cutter and lighter.

"Did you tell Chay to let someone attack him?"

Aravan cuts the end of the cigar and runs a little torch along the end, making sure the cigar is lit evenly before raising it to his mouth. He's smiling a bit as he does so, and Kat does not need his father to acknowledge aloud that he noticed which name Kat had used.

"No," he says on an exhale that sends a brief puff of smoke into the air between them. "It was his idea. I merely provided suggestions for how to reduce the margin of error."

Instinctively, Kat thinks that it's for the best that he doesn't know the identity of the man who attacked Charis. Plan or

otherwise, if he *did* know, that person wouldn't survive the day—

Would you like to know?

It's not a voice. Kat doesn't *hear* it, in his head or otherwise. It's more like an impulse. A desire.

One that was nonetheless able to interrupt his train of thought. His father is looking at him as he puffs on his cigar again.

"Are they reading me right now?"

"No," Aravan answers immediately. "I had my sons added to the citizen bank, but Arkana can't read you."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't Sacrosanct." Aravan rests the edge of his palm on his whiskey glass so the end of the cigar is suspended over the ashtray beside it, letting the herbal smell of the catha smoke fill the air. "Arkana is technologically capable of reading you, but its programming won't allow it."

Kat lets this sit for a moment. As he does, he notices two things: the first is that, with the mad rush they'd been in to leave Arkana, Kat still has not had anything to eat or drink since several hours before he got his monitor.

The second is that he can go another two days, sixteen hours, and forty-two minutes before his lack of sustenance will become uncomfortable, and he has never shared his father's palate for whiskey.

"Because I don't have the blood."

Aravan enters a command on his monitor. A beat later, a holographic chessboard materializes on the table between them.

“Indulge me,” he says, but Kat knows an order when he hears one.

As usual for these types of meetings, his father has taken black. Kat picks up his first piece.

He does not immediately set it on the board, though. With his former eyes, the white of this set had always looked a little blue to Kat, same as most holotech—now, it’s perfectly transparent but for the faintest line demarcating its edges. He sees the little diode at the bottom that’s causing it to throw light that does, at the right angle, make the piece appear white.

At eye level, it throws rainbows like a prism. Like most white things do now. He sets the piece on the board, making his first move.

“Arkana has the ability to read you through your monitor because your monitor is part of the mainframe,” his father says, making his first move before reaching for his cigar again. “However, Arkana only monitors those with the blood. That’s how it was designed from the very beginning. It was not designed to innovate endlessly—it was built with a purpose.”

“To keep the people with the blood alive,” Kat supplies.

It’s a bit of a guess, but his father confirms it with a nod once Kat makes his next move—and immediately winces internally as his father moves his bishop down two-thirds of the board and takes out his second piece.

Was that notice, or was that a parry? Kat isn't sure yet. Without moving his hand, he looks at the board, playing out a few sequences for both sides in his mind before making a move that makes his father smile.

"Arkana is not a research machine. It is a maintenance machine. Every bit of knowledge on the mainframe is related somehow to the survival of Sacrosancts, no matter how remotely."

So the mainframe doesn't care about anyone else. It isn't hoarding its own resources; it isn't greedy. It isn't sentient. It simply has no use for anything that doesn't affect Sacrosancts.

His father is watching him as though he's hearing Kat's reasoning aloud and finding it lacking.

"Are you familiar with the principle of quantum entanglement?"

Quantum entanglement is the physical phenomenon that occurs when a group of particles are generated, interact, or share spatial proximity in a way such that the quantum state of each particle of the group cannot be described independently of the state of the others, including when the particles are separated by a large distance.

"I am now," Kat answers. His father actually laughs at this—just once, but something deep in Kat's hindbrain feels pleasure at the thought of making his father happy.

Aravan sets his next piece down. Kat makes his next move nearly instantly, removing one of his father's pieces.

“Yes, I imagine you are. The relationship between Arkana and its human charges is something like quantum entanglement. Though I will ask you not to look up gambits on the mainframe while we play.”

Kat raises a brow. “I’m not.”

Aravan sits forward in his chair, letting the cigar smolder in the air between them while he makes his own assessments. Kat takes advantage of the silence.

“What about the rest of the family?”

There are two branches of the family. Aravan and Aurivash are both Sacrosanct; Yen and Leon’s mother had been as well. Of the four Sacrosanct members of the family still living, Kat’s current understanding is that with Leon now disconnected, only Vash is still connected to the mainframe. Yen has been disconnected for years, rigged to a sim that mimes the life of an engineer on Arkana.

Aravan looks at him briefly, assessing something else.

“How’d you get Arkana to stop watching you?” Kat continues before his father can make his next move.

Another guess. Until this precise moment, though, Kat had never had a reason to doubt whether or not his father is still connected to the mainframe. Aravan has turned back to the board, but he smiles from where he’s analyzing it.

“Very good, Michal.” He makes a move that makes Kat swear internally, removing one of Kat’s knights and threatening his queen, then sits back in his chair again, tapping the end of his

cigar against the ashtray before raising it to his lips. He takes another puff before answering. “I once knew a very talented doctor, and she made my blood signal inert.”

Kat’s head snaps up. He holds his father’s gaze for a few long, silent seconds as his mother’s memory sits between them like the smoke from the cigar.

His mother had died of acute promyelocytic leukemia over a decade and a half ago. As Kat now understands it, the cancer had been the result of spending too much time in the clinic she’d operated in the Boneyard. The clinic had been free of charge, and had also been one of the ways Kat’s family had built the good will in the surrounding community that allowed them to maintain control of the Boneyard and surrounding districts with basically no opposition from other gangs. Goodwill they still maintained to this day, at least in that part of the city, though the number of people who remember his mother is growing smaller and smaller.

The clinic had been set up at the bottom of a hill, far from anything else in one of the most heavily-shelled parts of the Boneyard, in one of the only buildings that had survived the Uprising that had preceded the third nuclear winter. Unbeknownst to anyone, though—at least until after she’d died, when his father’s warpath led to the whole area being exhumed as he scourged the city in search of both answers and a culprit—the reason the area had been abandoned, aside from the destruction, was that most of the buildings had been built right on top of dozens, possibly hundreds of thick-walled barrels of uranium tailings, otherwise known as yellowcake.

Yellowcake is the product of the extraction and refinement of uranium ore. There had once been a mine on the other side of the hill, though between the Uprising and the long, violent sandstorms that had characterized the third nuclear winter, anything dangerous in it has long since been buried.

His mother and her medical assistant had been the only two who ever spent an extended amount of time in the clinic. They'd both developed cancers around the same time, and neither had survived. His mother had died first. For a long time, Kat had blamed his father for it, convinced that his Sacrosanct father could have just taken her to Arkana and had her cured. The fact he now knows otherwise has never quite erased the lingering feeling that his mother's death was his father's fault.

In the end, it's Kat who breaks the silence as he turns back to the board, mulling over a couple of moves.

"What about Karra and Charis?"

"Already taken care of," his father answers immediately. Kat had been reaching for a piece, but he stops short and glances up again, waiting. "Karra and Charis don't have the blood."

For a moment, Kat is *sure* he misheard. That makes no sense. As Kat considers, he weighs the merits of the move he'd been about to make and decides on another instead.

"How do you know? Did you have it tested?"

"I didn't have to. I added them to the citizen bank myself."

Kat's fingers had almost been on his remaining knight, but he stops short. "Excuse me?"

“Make your play, son.” Kat narrows his eyes, then makes his original move and sits back again. Aravan immediately takes out that pawn. “Try again.”

He’d been hoping his father would call that bluff. There are two routes, here: one with his remaining bishop, one with his queen. The first will give him the win in four moves if his father continues with the gambit he’s currently pursuing; the second, much riskier, could potentially do it in two, though the odds are slim that his father won’t recognize the play.

He does neither. He moves his knight backward, intercepting the pawn that had been about to reach promotion.

“Good,” his father praises.

He doesn’t move immediately. He holds Kat’s gaze again, and this time Kat can practically see the gears in his brain turning.

“I had a sister,” Aravan says. “In a manner of speaking. She was a couple of years older than Aurivash, maybe thirteen when we took her in. She was Olvida, no known family, and most of her enclave had been killed by desert marauders.”

His father evaluates the board, then makes a move that takes out one of Kat’s pawns. If Kat doesn’t move his rook, he’ll likely lose it next turn.

That his father would hide something as significant as the existence of an entire sibling, ward, or whatever she was that Kat had never known about is not actually out of character for him. Olvida is the lowest social class, the one made up of those who have no family or identity or clear place in society. The forgotten.

Still, Kat can tell his father isn't saying something, something that has nothing to do with where his father's family's ward had come from.

"What happened to her?"

He moves his queen, then waits to see if his father will take the bait.

"She died," his father answers. "A number of years ago." He looks at the board a final time before making his move, then back at Kat. "Her name was Mensiria."

For a long moment, the entire room spins. Kat's stomach nearly drops through the floor.

Ordinarily it's unwise to show emotion in front of his father. His father is too good at manipulating it. As the implications of this immediately begin to spiral out in Kat's mind, though, he sits back and runs a hand over his face.

His father had commissioned Karra's sim personally, Kat thinks. But if Karra and Charis aren't actually Sacrosanct, then—

"Not even you would let Rafel fuck his cousin," Kat nearly spits.

Kat doesn't need to hear the full name to know that his father is talking about Mensiria Delphinius Centaura, Charis and Karra's mother. His father smiles.

"They are not cousins. Lyrian is their father."

"*Why* didn't you tell Karra he doesn't have the blood?!"

Karra hadn't even *had* to disconnect. If what his father has told him this evening is true—which Kat suspects it is, because his father wouldn't be sharing this at all if there weren't some reason for Kat to know it—

His father speaks again before Kat can think much further. "It's safer for Karra to be disconnected."

Kat's look hardens. "Why?"

His father looks him in the eyes and takes out his queen.

"Because Karra is reckless and impulsive."

"Bullshit. That isn't why, we both know you're protecting Karra out of obligation."

Aravan smiles. Kat moves the pawn that's currently in the way of his rook.

There isn't a move here where his father can take out that piece, and he seems to know it. But his father has a knight closing in on Kat's king, and he'll have checkmate in two moves if Kat doesn't act defensively. His father moves his knight, then takes another puff of his cigar.

Then he nods. "Yes. It was a test of his loyalty to the family."

Before Kat had gone up, Karra had told him that if Kat wanted to fly under Arkana's radar, then he would need to rig to a sim as well. Kat hadn't liked that idea then, as it would defeat the primary purpose he'd gotten the monitor for in the first place: access to the mainframe.

One final time, Kat meets his father's eyes and tips over his king.

He'd been nearly cornered anyway. The only thing worse than showing emotion in front of his father is trying to defend against him. And right now, Kat is so disgusted that he can't even bring himself to try.

He stands, moving his chair back.

"I'm leaving," he says.

Aravan looks up at him from the board, then back down. He nods.

Kat will be back. But he can't be here right now. They both know that, too.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charis hadn't been lying to the crowd on Arkana. He really has been writing a lot.

For as long as Charis could remember, whenever he's had a feeling too big or complicated to talk about, he's put it in writing, often through a character he'd created for that purpose specifically. If he could figure out how they would feel, what they would say in his place—well. It's easier to figure out what *he* would do if he has something to compare against.

So a few weeks ago, when he'd sat down to figure out what he was going to do about suddenly finding himself stuck in the orbit of an organized crime syndicate with no way to get out, Charis hadn't been expecting the first song that came pouring out of him to be about his mother.

Charis had been a few days shy of fourteen when his parents were assassinated on Arianus Bridge outside the Vizor. His father was killed instantly; his mother was airlifted off-world in a medevac transport in critical condition, and she'd died in Corona Borealis hospital in Arkana's Central Command District five days later, on Charis's birthday.

Since then, it has been hard to celebrate his birthday every year. Karra always makes an effort, and Charis appreciates it more than his brother knows. But the ghosts are louder, the feeling of holding his unconscious mother's hand while her breathing slowed, then stopped forever too real even now, nearly seven years later.

Collapsible Heart had been the first song. He'd written it in one sitting the day Kat had told him all his guards were dead, crying all over his notescreen in a way that made the digital letters swirl around as the tears landed until Charis brushed them off the surface. And after that—practically possessed with the need to know what this vacant hole that had opened up inside him was all about, Charis had gone down to his father's study and pulled a book off the shelf at random, then sat on his chair to read.

It was a book about meteorology, the science of the atmosphere. The first chapter was about rain.

It has been over half a millennium since this part of the world has seen rain. Charis has certainly never experienced it. It isn't even taught in schools anymore except as this phenomenon that used to happen a long time ago, as impossible to imagine as dinosaurs or travel by boat. But just as suddenly as he'd been caught up in the memory of his mother, he'd been caught in something else. Something *like* a memory, but not, because he hadn't lived it personally—but something around him had.

The Earth had.

Now, there are still reams of books all over the coffee table, everything from music theory to geology to ancient religions of the pre-apocalypse world. All from his father's study. Most of them are face-down at this point, some propped up and holding each other's pages open as Charis makes notes over them that appear on his notescreen, occasionally copying entire paragraphs with a swipe of his finger. He isn't exactly sure where he's going yet, but whenever he reads these back over, he knows the ideas will come.

Charis had never paid that much attention to his father's study while his parents were alive. The door was rarely closed, so it wasn't off-limits or anything. He'd just never had much interest in what he'd viewed at the time as one of his father's quirky old-person habits—reading paper books, many of which had seen the world before nuclear winter and had been meticulously, and later technologically, preserved and stabilized so they didn't disintegrate with age. When his father had been home, he'd rarely been without a book in hand.

Charis sees the appeal now. There's so much information in these books that isn't anywhere else, neither on the mainframe nor any Earth system. The science mostly is, but it's the legends, the history and stories and weird traditions totally lost to time, that are the most captivating. Some of them are written in languages that are long dead, and Charis has had to read them through a translation protocol on his holoscreen in order to understand them—still, even then, he can't seem to read fast enough.

So Charis doesn't fully register when his front door opens. He figures it's just Karra here to mother hen him some more while his injury heals. Already, it's way better than it was—barely a week, and the combination of his body's natural healing, his monitor's acceleration of the process, and whatever the nurse on Arkana had put on him have long since closed the wound, rendering bandages unnecessary. But it still aches, and he has to be careful how he sits.

The door closes. There are footsteps, then the sound of someone removing their shoes before walking down the steps to the living room.

“Karra, I promise I’m fine—”

Someone sinks down to their knees immediately behind him, pressing him into their chest with a hand around his front.

Charis’s breath hitches. He goes stock still, core muscles engaging automatically to protect his injury, and looks at the hand that’s holding him, following it up the person’s arm until he turns as much as he can to see Kat with his face tucked into the crook of his neck.

Charis immediately relaxes.

“I’ll have you know I did lock my door,” he says.

“Mmh,” Kat hums to his hair, tightening his hold a bit once Charis lets his weight rest on him. “Lock it better.”

“Why? If I get better locks, you’ll just break into those too.”

“Hm,” Kat says again. “Neither confirmed nor denied.”

Charis laughs a bit. Laughing doesn’t hurt anymore, though it still makes his muscles pull uncomfortably. He rests his head back against Kat’s shoulder as Kat runs his other hand over Charis’s hipbone, then down the inside of his thigh.

“You’re a menace to society,” Charis says.

Kat licks a stripe up the side of Charis’s neck, then tugs at his earlobe with his teeth. Charis shivers.

“Why yes.”

Charis grabs Kat's wrists, stilling his hands where they're already tracking all over his body, and quickly turns around so he's facing Kat. He slings his arms around Kat's neck.

"My menace though."

"*Hmm.*" Freed now, Kat slides his hand up Charis's back under the hem of his shirt. "If you keep talking like that, I'm going to do very bad things to you, Velcharis."

"*Hmmm,*" Charis responds, openly parroting Kat's tone. "Is it still considered bad if I want you to?"

Kat's hands close around Charis's waist as he practically growls in his ear. "Don't tempt me, Angel."

Charis brings a hand to the side of Kat's face, angling him how he wants, and kisses him.

Immediately Kat's arm bands around Charis's back again. This time, one hand goes into Charis's hair, holding his head steady while the other gropes at his side under his shirt. Kat's hands are rough, calloused from the machines he's constantly working on and who knows what else, and Charis is *so* obsessed with them.

The only thing that might be better is his tongue. A slight nip on the lip and Charis opens for Kat, and he can't quite stop the noise he makes against Kat's mouth as Kat sucks the air out of his lungs and the desire to think out of his brain.

Kat is so strong. He isn't even doing anything more than holding Charis in place, really, but it's the way he does it, the way he's simultaneously holding himself back and anchoring Charis in

place as he licks into his mouth—yeah. Kat is powerful. Charis knows Kat could have his way with him right now if he wanted, and he finds he's…actually into that idea.

Just as it's getting *really* good, Kat pulls back, and Charis can feel every ounce of reluctance that bleeds out of him as he does. "Which one of us is the menace to society?"

Charis leans in closer.

"Society loves me, I'm just a menace to *you.*"

Kat groans again, letting his head fall back a little for a second. "From the moment I met you. I can't believe I ever thought you were innocent."

Kat's thumb ghosts around the edges of Charis's wound in a way that's almost reverent, as though he's simultaneously assessing how Charis is healing and marveling at how quickly. They're close enough now that Charis can feel Kat's semi through the fabric of his jeans. His *white* jeans, Charis notices—and not the ones he'd worn on Arkana.

In fact, nothing Kat is currently wearing is borrowed. Once Charis notices, he holds Kat's biceps and leans back enough to look him over more fully.

He looks—well. Hot, obviously. Extremely hot, in a way that Charis hadn't realized until right now manifests the *precise* energy and vibe he goes for in a man. But more pressingly, he looks *real*, like a bona fide, dyed-in-the-wool Sacrosanct.

Apart from the scars. But there's a white jacket Charis doesn't recognize either on the arm of the couch behind him. And right

now, Charis is far more interested in the deep olive skin the shirt's plunging v-neck leaves bare.

The slightest hint of gooseflesh raises in his wake as Charis runs his fingers down Kat's chest from collarbone to sternum. Kat has a scar there, too, a jagged thing that looks like it was made by a blunt object, and Charis has no self-control right now, so he traces it. "Did Leon take you shopping?"

Kat shakes his head, unable to hide an amused smile despite what Charis's touch is obviously doing to him. "No. I went myself."

Charis pauses, frowning a bit. "Where?"

"Same place you get yours, I bet. The Cloud District. Which, by the way, is a stupid name."

It takes Charis a second to process this. But when he looks down again, he sees Kat's monitor clear as day on his left forearm and the whole previous week comes back to him. *Obviously*, Charis thinks—Kat's monitor means he has access not just to the mainframe, but to every perk Sacrosancts alone enjoy as well—and he'd just looked it up and walked right into one of the most exclusive districts in the city, second only to the Vizor, like he had every right to be there.

Charis is *so* into this. He couldn't even stop his smile if he tried.

"What do you think?" Kat asks.

It's clearly not a real question. As Kat had earlier, Charis dips his fingers under the hem of Kat's shirt and turns his smile a bit sly.

“I *think*, while I like this, I really want to see what those jeans look like without your shirt on.”

This time it’s Kat who stills Charis’s wrists. One quickly returns to Charis’s back, though, as Kat lets his face fall into the crook of Charis’s neck.

“Angel, I’m trying so hard to be good. You’re still injured.”

“Oh? And how long do I have until I can resume strenuous activities?”

There’s a long beat while Kat assesses, running his thumb in a maddening circle around the edge of Charis’s wound again.

“One day, fourteen hours, and thirty-six minutes.” He lifts his head, meeting Charis’s eyes with a look that’s all business. “Give or take. Though it will be another five days and…” Kat slides his hand up Charis’s front from just under his wound, letting his palm brush carefully over it. “…eight hours, roughly, until it’s fully healed.”

“You’re a natural,” Charis says. He slides a hand into Kat’s hair, tugging his face back enough that he can kiss him again. Just once. “What about yours?”

Kat laughs once, then leans in closer. Almost like he’s going for a kiss, but at the last second, he stops short. “Nice try, Angel,” he says, almost against Charis’s lips. “But I’ll tell you what. When you’re recovered, you can take my clothes off whenever you want.”

And then, without warning, Kat stands, pulling Charis to his feet.

Bastard. Kat is already making for the kitchen, but Charis doesn't need to be able to see his face to know the smug look he's wearing right now. Instead, Charis hangs back, watching, making detailed mental notes of how phenomenally attractive Kat looks in clothes that are actually his.

At first he isn't sure what Kat is after. The second he moves from the living room carpet to the kitchen tile, though, the fridge door opens and hands Kat one of Karra's beers. Kat grabs the bottle before the fridge can open it for him and pulls the cap off with his teeth, then takes a generous swig.

"Long night," Kat says by way of explanation, as though that wasn't one of the hottest things Charis has ever seen. He tosses the metal cap in the recycling once the kitchen opens it for him and wipes the condensation on his lips off on the back of his hand—then looks at his hand and stares at the little track of liquid left on it.

It's little things like this that are making Charis more aware than ever of the privilege he's been born to. Especially with how much he's been reading about the old world. Take this, for example: even on a planet nearly entirely sucked dry of water, Charis has never known its scarcity personally. The houses in the Vizor are extremely efficient, yes, but just about all of them are equipped with combustion tanks far underground that use solar energy to create water out of harvested hydrogen and oxygen.

At the compound, on the other hand—as he has learned in the last few days, while there's a huge machine that takes up an entire room that's constantly recycling water, only a small fraction of what it produces is drinkable. Refilling it when

supplies run low is a dangerous, day-long expedition that takes a team of eight to ten people piloting an industrial-grade transport to a natural spring deep in marauder territory. Kat has not specifically told him so, but looking around at the family guards is enough to tell Charis that most of Kat's scars are from those runs.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me." Charis joins him, carefully leaning on his forearms on the counter across the kitchen island from Kat, mindful of his injury. "Is it your dad?"

Kat sets the bottle on the counter audibly, but he doesn't take his hand off it.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Read my mind."

"I don't," Charis says, amused. "I'm just good at reading people. And anyway, you said you talked to him when you messaged me last night. What did you end up doing to take your mind off it, besides trespass in the Cloud District?"

Kat takes another drink. "Excuse you. I have every right to be there."

Charis huffs a laugh. "Right, right. Same as me."

There's a flash of something in Kat's eyes just then, there and gone, and the sight of it catches Charis off guard enough that he bites off the other end of the wisecrack he'd been about to

make. Before he can press, though, Kat is speaking again, answering his question.

“I took the motorcycle that wrecked in the bout at Old Forge out on the plateau for a test run.”

There are at least a dozen bikes at the compound, most of them in Kat’s garage. Charis knows exactly which one Kat is talking about, and not just because the family guards have been making bets between themselves for the last three weeks over whether or not Kat would be able to get it running again.

“At *night?* But that one doesn’t have headlights?”

Kat grins at this. “Not a problem.”

Right. Kat has night vision now. Considering the mission to Arkana to get Kat a monitor had been his idea, Charis is apparently really bad at remembering that Kat is now Sacrosanct in every way that matters.

And Kat seems to be onto him with this train of thought, because as he finishes off his beer and sets the bottle in the glass recycler the kitchen opens for him, Kat pins Charis in place with a stare that makes his stomach swoop and saunters up to Charis like a predator, rounding the counter, and Charis turns to face him with his back to the counter just as Kat cages him against it with an arm on either side.

“Do you want to see what *else* I’ve learned since I got this?”

Charis’s heart has kicked up. *Fuck,* how is Kat so perfectly engineered to knock the wind out of him without even touching him? “I thought you were trying to be good?”

Kat is looking at his lips. “I am,” he says, and closes the distance between them.

Except instead of kissing Charis, he steps up to his side so they’re facing the same direction and enters something on his monitor.

A holoscreen materializes in front of them. Charis tries not to be *too* disappointed.

When he sees what’s on it, though, Charis’s disappointment quickly turns to panic. “Wait, Kat, what are you doing?”

Shit. *Shit.* A much worse oversight than forgetting Kat has a monitor, Charis had forgotten to warn him about the forum post he’d seen before the mission, the one that warned against looking up information about the smoke on the mainframe.

“Relax, Angel,” Kat says, typing something into a search engine too quickly for Charis to read it. “I can practically hear your heart racing.”

“So then you know about that one post on the off-system—?”

Kat looks at him sideways. “Do I look like an amateur to you?”

Okay, fair. Charis blushes, though the panic only partially recedes, because there’s something that isn’t adding up.

“So you saw it and you’re *still* looking up the smoke on the mainframe…?”

Kat is scrolling through something now, though, and frowning at the screen. “I’m not Sacrosanct. The mainframe doesn’t care what I do.”

Charis's entire brain stops. For a few long moments, Charis isn't even sure he's breathing. But Kat is still navigating the mainframe's complicated web of search engines like he's been doing it all his life, so it's nearly half a minute before he notices he's left Charis in the dust.

"*What?* How?"

Charis's voice is small. Kat seems to have found what he was looking for—he follows one more link, then turns to Charis.

"Oh, baby," he says, his tone immediately softening once he sees the look on Charis's face. "I'm sorry, I thought you knew. That that's why you suggested I get one."

Charis shakes his head. "I didn't—"

He cuts himself off. There is something here, something Kat isn't saying.

"So wait, if the mainframe isn't watching you, then that means—?"

Kat bumps the underside of the holoscreen so it's closer to eye level, then looks at Charis sideways again. On the screen in front of them is the landing page to an encrypted government data repository. Kat is grinning now in a way that makes Charis simultaneously excited and nervous.

"For your second revolutionary act, Angel—how do you feel about some petty theft?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charis will say this about the experience of breaking into the government data repository: Kat is not as good a hacker as Leon. The longest amount of time Charis has personally seen it take for Leon to penetrate a firewall is about fifteen minutes. Credit where credit is due, though—Charis has also never personally witnessed Leon attempting to get through a firewall this complicated or difficult. There are layers to it, and the differences between how each of them work don't follow any discernible pattern.

Whatever is in this repository, the mainframe is trying very hard to keep people out of it.

Kat swears at the holoscreen on his fourth unsuccessful attempt to get through what appears to be the final layer of the firewall. It's hard to be sure, especially since Charis isn't looking at it.

"We *can* call Leon," Charis reminds Kat.

"No," Kat snaps. "At this point it's a matter of principle."

"Whatever you say, Kat."

They've moved from the kitchen back to the living room, and Charis is sitting with his back to one armrest of an oversized chair, his legs thrown over the other. He's picking at one of his acoustic guitars, since he can't really help with this. He's always been a shit programmer.

The melody to one of the songs he's written for his latest album is fighting him, though. Normally he tries to compose the

melody and lyrics at the same time, but he'd woken up one morning after a dream about traveling the old world by ship after reading through an illustrated children's book about a kind of sea-based criminal called *pirates*—not something Charis has ever encountered before, though it explains the origin of that word. They were driven primarily by a desire for gold, apparently, and they'd been willing to raise hell to get it.

There was a rhyme in the book that had gotten stuck in Charis's head: *red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.* When he'd woken up after that dream, the lyrics had poured into his brain almost entirely unprompted, and it had been a mad dash to get them all written down before he forgot them.

He runs a few iterations of a melody that has seemed promising so far, finger picking a rendition that Charis already knew Piscaya, his guitarist, would elevate into a masterpiece once he heard the finished thing, whatever that ended up being. And Kat hasn't seemed to mind the background noise.

Kat lets out a soft *ha!* of victory and Charis pauses his playing, making to set his guitar down and go back to the side of the sectional Kat is sitting on.

"You're through?"

"Not yet. Keep playing, Angel, it's helping me focus."

Charis nods, even though Kat isn't looking at him, and sits back across the chair like he'd been before, picking up where he'd left off with the melody.

It's been an hour since they started, give or take a few minutes. At this point Charis is convinced that basically everything Kat does is attractive, because even staring at a holoscreen like it has personally offended him, concentrating as single-mindedly as he is, Kat still looks like the manifestation of a character from the pirated—Charis smiles at that word—Earth shows he and Leon used to binge in high school.

And then it hits him. What the melody is supposed to be. Because Kat is focusing, Charis narrowly holds back his own exclamation of victory, instead picking out the melody that has just occurred to him.

"Transcription," Charis announces in the tone his monitor is configured to recognize as an order. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Kat glance up. "Notate as played."

He plays the melody, watching as the program transcribes it in real time to make sure it's accurate. It takes a couple of tries, but when he's satisfied that it's right, Charis closes the program manually and climbs off the chair, setting his guitar where he'd been sitting.

Kat hasn't said anything for a while. Nor has he been typing, apparently. Charis sits down next to him on the couch, close enough that their thighs are flush, and looks at the holoscreen.

"You got it?"

"I got it," Kat says.

He's smiling, though he hasn't looked away from the screen. With one hand, he navigates through the database; with the other, he runs his hand up and down the inside of Charis's leg.

There's nothing expressly sexual in the touch. Or—okay, there *is,* but it's not the main thing. It feels like Kat is grounding himself, and he's using Charis to do it.

It's a little bit hard to make sense of what they're seeing. Kat has navigated to a page called "Incident Log," where, based on the size of the scroll bar at the side of the page, there are probably thousands of little thumbnail images lined up with tiny text beside them—small enough that Charis has to turn his finger against his temple to dial up the magnification in his eyes in order to read it from where he's sitting.

The images are arranged in reverse chronological order by date. As Kat scrolls down the page, Charis would guess that less than five percent of the images look to be taken from the canyon Kat had taken him to the day after they'd met. The rest of them are from places Charis doesn't recognize at all: snow-dusted mountains, deep ravines, even shocking numbers of them from what look to be fields of ice. Those ones increase in frequency the further down they scroll.

One set, though, makes Kat slow as they pass it. Both of them lean in closer.

It's a lake. A nearly circular body of the bluest water Charis has ever seen. There's a little island off to one side of it that's ringed in tall, dense pine trees.

Kat stops on that image. It's dated for over a thousand years ago, but the caption suggests it's much older:

Panorama, Crater Lake, Oregon, USA, pre-fallout baseline, XREF_07062M2X344.pxx.HDF (arcane software required)

Kat taps the image, making it fill about half the holoscreen. A text box appears with it off to one side.

There's nothing in the box except grids upon grids of numbers. Kat drags his finger down it diagonally, making it scroll for at least ten seconds before lifting his finger away. He and Charis both look at each other at the same time.

"Where is this? *When* is this?" Charis asks.

"Dunno," Kat answers, and closes out of the pop-up window. "There was something a bit further up—"

Kat cuts himself off, scrolling up until he lands on an image Charis hadn't paid attention to earlier. He expands that one as well.

It's clearly the same place. Same nearly-circular lake, same little mountain of an island off to one side. In this one, though, all the trees are dead, and there's a yellowish sheen to the surface of the water.

Panorama, Crater Lake, Oregon, USA, post-fallout, XREF_1112M2X345.pxx.HDF (arcane software required)

It's not very long at all before Charis realizes that they're all like this. On their own, none of the individual images make sense. The more of them Kat taps on, though, the more obvious the pattern becomes, until Charis finally voices it aloud.

"It's a terraforming log."

Kat turns to him. "Can you elaborate?"

No, Charis thinks, but he tries anyway. He sits forward, turning to Kat.

"There's a story here. The further back we go, the more water there is, right? So here—" he scrolls back to the first image and expands it again. "Tons of water. And here—" he scrolls up, finding the second image from the same place. "It looks like it's contaminated. And here—" Charis finds a third image further up that they'd both missed, also obviously taken from the same place. In this one, though, there are no more trees at all, not even their dead trunks—and there is also no water in the lake.

Charis sits back. "See what I mean?"

Kat frowns. He scrolls back down to where they'd started, moving up slower this time. Then he swears in Arkane.

"*Ishada,*" he says in his drawling grounder accent, making Charis smile, even though Kat isn't looking at him. He tightens his grip on Charis's leg, switching quickly back to the common language—where their accents are the same. "You're right. What the *fuck.*"

There's something still missing, though. Charis frowns, crossing his brows as he leans in toward the screen again.

"What about the ocean?"

Kat glances at him again. "I'm listening."

"Look." Gently, Charis moves Kat's arm out of the way and scrolls up through the photos. "In all of this, there isn't a single picture of the ocean. But the ocean still existed when a lot of these were taken, right? Where is it?"

In its own separate incident log, apparently. The next set of photos they open is even longer than the first. Worse, in this one, the narrative is even more obvious: in the oldest photos at the bottom, there is still ocean. The further up they scroll, though, the drier it gets—until they reach the top of the page, where there's almost none of it left.

"What—how—*How?* Where did it go?" It's Charis who is scrolling up, now, and they don't even have to blow up the images to see what is clearly happening. "Earth's surface was over 70% ocean. *Where did it go—?!*"

Kat sits forward, elbows on his knees as he steeples his hands in front of his face. It's about half a minute before he says anything.

"I was afraid of this," Kat says, so quiet that Charis almost misses it.

Charis navigates back out of the ocean log to the landing page of this database and sits all the way back, pushing the screen away enough that he can bring his legs up on the couch. Already, Charis misses Kat's hand on him, so he shifts until one leg is resting against Kat's.

"It's Arkana, isn't it?"

Kat nods. They're both thinking it. It has to be.

"Then we need to get closer."

Kat lowers his hands. "As in, go back up?"

Charis shakes his head. “No. Or, well—yes, but not off-world. We need to get closer to the smoke.”

Kat frowns at this. “My crawler can’t get any closer than I took you before.”

Charis pokes Kat’s leg with his foot, smiling. “That’s fine. We’re not taking your crawler.”

Then he gets up, bumping the screen enough that it swings around through the air toward Kat’s other side. Kat is side-eyeing him, but after a beat, he stows the screen and takes Charis’s offered hand.

“Hopefully the battery isn’t dead,” Charis says to himself as he leads Kat up the foyer stairs to the door next to his father’s study. He glances at Kat—Kat is throwing a dubious eye at the locked door. “You haven’t tried to get in yet?”

When Kat doesn’t answer, Charis laughs and enters a sequence of commands on his monitor that unlocks the door. “If you’re going to be around more, I’ll get you a code for this door so you don’t have to park outside.”

The door leads to a staircase that’s actually underground, cut into the rock under the house’s foundation. The lights come on automatically—Charis lets Kat step by first, then re-locks the door and leads him down.

It’s been a long time since Charis has been down here. He hadn’t yet been old enough to drive when his parents died—and when he *had* come of age, the thought of driving any of their transports was too weird for a long time, and he’d relied on a combination of agency transports and Leon until necessity

had forced him to learn once Karra started disappearing for days at a time, which had been happening for far longer than he'd known Rafel. Now, Charis's personal transport is in the much smaller garage on the ground level.

"Behold, the family fleet," Charis says with zero fanfare, then spins the circular handle in the center so the doors retract enough for them to enter.

"What the *fuck,* Chay!"

Kat's voice reverberates around the massive space as Charis starts to make for the transport they'll be taking. Kat hasn't moved out of the doorway, and his eyes look so huge and dumbfounded from here that Charis can't help but laugh again.

"I thought you of all people would appreciate this! Come in, though, the doors close automatically."

Kat complies, still looking a bit like he's seen God.

Which Charis can understand. His family's underground hangar is one of the largest in the Vizor, so sized because of his late father's second worldly indulgence: classic transports.

There are dozens of them in all kinds of colors and shapes, ranging in size from personal pods not much bigger than a motorcycle to a sleek off-worlder that had been top of the line seven or eight years ago, its narrow, triangular wingspan bearing twin turbines capable of breathing either air or fire. It's that one he sees Kat walk up to first, mostly because it's closest to the door. He runs his fingers over the point of a wing.

"I *definitely* need to start coming to you more."

Kat's fingers are reverent over the metal. Apart from the deeply-tinted cockpit window, the entire transport is matte white, almost velvet to the touch from where it's been treated with a substance that can repel plasma fire. Charis watches as Kat runs his thumb over his fingers, probably seeing if it left any residue.

"You can't bring wheeled transports in here," he says, coming to stand next to Kat again.

"What, too conspicuous? Too loud?"

Charis looks at the transport's dark cockpit, following Kat's gaze.

"Too dusty. There's nothing elitist snobs with a penchant for white hate more than sand in their streets."

There's a beat. Kat turns to him, blinks, and then cracks up laughing.

"Chay—*Chay,* what the fuck, you *cannot* be serious. A desert planet and their biggest complaint is *sand?*"

Charis puts on his most absurd Central Command off-worlder accent, sounding every inch the coddled socialite who should be thanked for even deigning to speak the common language. "Of course, Michal, don't you understand? The Vizor is the *one* place in the city where Arkanenes can live in a semblance of off-world peace—"

Kat's laughing is loud enough by now to drown out the end of Charis's sentence, and for a second he looks like he's about to slap the wing of the transport until he pulls his hand just short,

gently laying it on the wing instead. Kat could definitely try to bludgeon this transport with a blunt object and wouldn't even leave a scratch, but Charis can appreciate the respect Kat is treating it with anyway.

"This way," Charis says, still in that exaggerated, posh accent, momentarily bringing a hand around Kat's back and spurring him forward with a gentle shove. "After all, when engaging in criminal behavior, it is critical to remain inconspicuous."

Charis leads Kat across the cavernous space, much of which has been left open so that transports could navigate in and out. The cloaked transport is in the back, behind a row of some of his father's oldest classics, all meticulously restored, and though they're no longer touching, Charis can practically feel the moment Kat's eyes lock on to the late Lyrian Lyrianus Cygnara's most prized possession.

"*No,*" Kat says on a breath, then darts down the line of transports to where the one wheeled model is parked at the end of the line. He drops to a squat, running his fingers over the flat silver casing of the wheel well before looking back at Charis. "Do you know what this is?!"

"A Mercedes SL 300 Gullwing," Charis answers. "1955, if I remember correctly."

Kat lowers his hand and stands, making a slow circle around the car. Charis has no idea what it looks like to him, but the look on his face as he inspects it—experimentally, Kat pulls one of the door handles, and he has to actually jump back and out of the way as the door lifts away from the rest of the car's body in a sweeping arc, revealing elegant red upholstery Charis knows is still buttery soft to the touch.

“This car is almost 2,000 years old. *How* is it preserved like this?”

Charis doesn’t actually know the answer to that, but it seems to be a rhetorical question anyway.

Kat looks inside for several long moments before closing the door, his reluctance to part with this relic of the old world practically dripping off him. It’s the most precious thing Charis has ever seen, all the more when Kat looks at him in awe, his hand still on the edge of the door where it meets the car’s outer body.

“Chay. When we get back, you’ve gotta let me drive that.”

“You can have it,” Charis says as Kat re-joins him en route to the transport they’ll be taking.

Kat stops walking. A beat later, Charis stops too, turning around to see Kat with a look of abject astonishment on his face. Charis grabs his hand and smiles. “I’m serious. Karra and I never drive it, and it might as well go to someone who will actually appreciate it.”

Before Charis can take another step, Kat’s arm is around his back and he’s pressing Charis into him hard enough to draw a gasp, his other hand in Charis’s hair, angling his face as he kisses him like he’s about to disappear.

Charis sighs into him, running a hand up Kat’s front until it’s behind his neck, his fingers just barely dipping into his hair as Kat’s lips move over his. Charis follows, opening for him when Kat runs his tongue over the seam of his lips, and when Charis’s tongue meets his, Kat tightens his hold with both hands, and

fuck, Kat is such a good kisser. Charis could do this all day. And all night. And hopefully more.

They have somewhere to be, though. It takes a lot of effort to pull back.

“What are you,” Kat breathes, touching his forehead to Charis’s. “What deity did I please in a past life to bring you to me?”

“One with a penchant for mischief, apparently.” Kat huffs a laugh at this, and Charis grabs Kat’s hand again, squeezing over the back of his neck before taking a step back. “Are you ready?”

“No,” Kat answers. “But let’s go before I lose my resolve.”

The cloaked transport is in the furthest back corner of the hangar and covered in a tarp to keep out dust, even though there’s basically zero dust in the hangar. Charis pulls back the tarp, bundling it in a pile that he leaves on the floor before opening the door.

Cloaked transports aren’t especially comfortable. They’re small and quiet, designed to bypass incoming signals of all kinds—including from the mainframe, in the off chance anyone with bad intentions is trying to sabotage it. Cloaked transports have to be registered, though, so that the mainframe itself—not its users—knows about their existence, in case any have to make emergency entrances into restricted areas. This one is dusty brown from the outside, the same color as the rolling sand at the bottom of the mountain behind his house, and is coated in the same anti-plasma substance as the off-worlder. Charis opens the door.

The cockpit is narrow—two pilot seats, like all transports that fly higher than ground level, and has only one row of seats behind it. Charis motions for Kat to enter first.

As Kat straps in, Charis closes the door and takes the main pilot's seat, firing up the ignition sequence. When he looks over at Kat, though, Kat looks to be steeling himself for something.

"You okay?"

"I hate flying," Kat answers.

Charis blinks.

"You—wait, hang on. You went off-world, even though you—"

Kat cuts him off with a look.

Oh.

Oh.

Apparently Charis isn't the only one who is in love after barely a month.

Charis's heart rate kicks up. He knows he's blushing, and he doesn't look at Kat as he flips through the transport's dials because if he looks at Kat right now, he *will* climb in his lap. Injury or not.

"I—sorry. I didn't know." Charis then enters the protocol on the transport dash that will initiate the cloaking sequence, rendering them invisible to all but the most sophisticated trackers. "You can turn it off?"

“Turn what off,” Kat asks. It sounds like a statement.

“Your fear of flying. Or of heights. Whatever it is. You can turn it off.” When Kat doesn’t respond, Charis turns to him as the two sequences load. “With your monitor. If you want.”

“How,” Kat says after a beat.

Charis hits the last few commands, then straps in. “It’s probably in your cognitive settings? I honestly don’t know, I’ve never had one. But your monitor can help you find it.” He looks at Kat, now, who is still just staring out the cockpit window. Charis’s heart pinches. “Do it quickly, though, because we’re about to go.”

The protocol loads. Charis looks over at Kat again, then enters a code on his monitor that opens the door in the hangar’s ceiling and pushes forward, steering across the hangar until the transport is directly under the door.

“Hang on,” Charis says. Kat brings a hand to his thigh.

Carefully—it’s been a while since he’s done this, his last time was for a heist film where he’d played a boy genius hacker and had needed to get government authorization to drive a transport like this during filming, since he was still underage at the time—Charis guides the transport up out of the opening in the ceiling, letting the craft hover above ground for a moment while he closes the door.

Kat has less of a death grip on his leg now, though his eyes are closed.

“Is it working?”

“Dunno yet. We’ll find out.”

That’s about the best they could hope for, Charis supposes. He squeezes Kat’s hand over his leg, then pushes the accelerator forward.

Rather than gun it like Leon had on Arkana, Charis accelerates smoothly, gaining altitude slowly enough that he doesn’t have to pause while the Vizor’s airspace security scans and registers the transport’s departure. The air shields retract—not plasma shields, just ordinary force fields that can only be opened with mainframe authorization, but which, for security reasons, are much harder to get through than the ground-level entrances—and once they leave the Vizor’s airspace, Charis hovers again for a moment while the shield re-forms behind them.

“You good?”

“Don’t worry about me, Angel. Just go.”

“I worry. It’s what I do. It’s kind of my thing. But, as you wish—”

And then they’re off. After a minute or so, Kat opens his eyes.

“I can’t even feel us moving,” he says. “Obviously we are, I see it.”

And they are. The cloaked transport is the fastest thing in the hangar besides the off-worlder, and it makes quick work of the plateau, the face of which slopes down gradually until they pass over the Iron Ghosts, then down toward the edge of the canyon. After about ten minutes, Charis sees them pass over the first boulder field they’d gone through.

It's different from up here. The first level of the canyon is wider than it is tall, with dense rock fields scattered throughout on both sides of what looks to be a dry riverbed. Out of curiosity, Charis follows it—and before long, he spots the place Kat had brought him to at the edge of the deeper gorge.

"Whoa," Charis says. "Looks like this used to be a waterfall."

Kat hasn't said anything for a while, though he also doesn't look as green as he had on the trip up to Arkana.

At least until they pass over the edge. Over the edge of the cliff, the rock face drops nearly straight down what could well be a couple of kilometers. It's hard to even clearly see the bottom. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Kat blanch.

"It's not there," Charis remarks.

With no one anywhere near them and no obstacles on the horizon, Charis chances a look at Kat. Kat's eyes are open, now, his feet up on the seat beside him, one arm around his knees.

"It's the right place, though, isn't it? I still have those pictures."

"It comes and goes," Kat says. He's staring in the direction of where the smoke usually comes from. "The day I took you was one of the more active days I've seen in a while."

"But not the most you've seen," Charis supplies, guessing.

Kat shakes his head. "No. There have been a couple of times where it was kicking up so much smoke, I thought it would be visible from the city."

But it isn't. Transports like the one they're in make distance feel strange, some capable of consuming hundreds of kilometers of distance in a few minutes. All the same, this is marauder territory, and there is zero reason for anyone to go out this way unless they have a good reason.

Still, how do you hide *smoke?*

"We should get closer," Kat says.

"Great minds," Charis agrees, then pushes the throttle forward.

The canyon is enormous. Charis already knew that, yes, but it's something different to see it from the air. Below, *far* below, there's a river—still flowing, even, with its banks lined green.

Someday he'll have to go down there. In his nearly twenty-one years of life, Charis has never experienced a naturally-flowing body of water before. But that's later.

The transport swallows the remaining distance to the origin of the smoke. The closer they get, the shallower the canyon grows, and the more obvious it becomes that the smoke is very much still present—there's just less of it, now, more like occasional puffs of steam than smoke from a fire.

"See if we can get right above it. Did you know we have lidar scanners in our eyes?" Kat is looking at him now, grinning a bit.

"I don't know what that is."

"Light detection and ranging. Useful for analyzing the Earth's surface."

Charis laughs once, steering them around the last butte between them and the fence. “I think I’m going to leave that to you, you seem to know what you’re doing.”

“Good, because I don’t know that even you can scan and fly a transport at the same time.”

It’s refreshing to see Kat in good spirits. “*Even* me? Careful, babe. If you put too much confidence in me, it might go to my head.”

Kat leans back with a satisfied groan, bringing his hand back to Charis’s thigh. He closes his eyes.

“Say that again.”

“What, if you have too much confidence in me it might go to my head?”

“No, the other thing.”

Charis is smiling, even though Kat can’t see it. “I think I’ll save that for the bedroom, actually.”

Kat groans again and slides down further in his chair.

The smoke is coming from a valley between two shield-like mountains, both of them bare, reddish sandstone completely devoid of plant life. As they exit the canyon, they pass over a flat expanse that seems at first like it’s petering out into nothing—at least until the river stops and seems to disappear underground.

Charis follows the line of the fence, flying perpendicular about a kilometer out from it, Kat sits up in his chair again. This close,

the fence is more like a huge, metal wall, probably at least a hundred meters high.

What *was* this place? What is it now?

"*What* the hell," Kat says, echoing his thoughts.

"I'll see if we can get over it."

Except they can't. The airspace is *blocked*, not just shielded. The transport warns him of this, a flashing notification on the dashboard that indicates the presence of a shield.

A plasma shield.

An *off-world grade* plasma shield, as strong as the one surrounding Arkana, one that the plasma repellant the transport is treated with can't repel.

Kat and Charis look at each other at the same time.

"I'm going to tell you a protocol. See if you can enter it on your monitor."

Kat nods. Charis tells him the protocol, and Kat enters it exactly as directed.

The shield does not retract.

"What the fuck," Charis says. "Can you enter it on the dash? It's on your side anyway—"

Kat is already up out of his seat and leaning over the control panel before Charis is finished speaking. Out of the corner of

his eye, Charis watches as Kat enters the same protocol on the transport's comms line, then waits for it to connect.

"It's just a spinning wheel. It won't connect," Kat says.

What the actual, literal fuck.

The thing is—in theory, there are basically no places on Earth that are off limits to Sacrosancts. That isn't true on Arkana—there are a few sectors in the outer ring that require special clearance—but on Earth, it *is* true, because, as they learn in grade school, nothing on the Earth is essential, therefore nothing is secret. Or at least, that's how it's supposed to be.

Is the mainframe *lying*—?

"Shit," Kat says suddenly. "Fuck. Charis, turn around. Now."

What?

"I'm serious. *Now.*"

Charis glances at Kat. "What is it—"

"I'll explain. Seriously, later. I promise. *Turn around.*"

So Charis steers the transport around, looping back around in a semicircle back toward the edge of the canyon far in the distance. It's still another ten kilometers or so before Kat appears to release his breath.

"What is it?"

There's a long beat before Kat responds. When he does, the look he gives Charis is absolutely, resolutely all business.

“It wants you out. It doesn’t want you to know. It’s protecting itself.”

This makes absolutely no sense and Charis says as much. “Come again?”

“It’s Arkana,” Kat answers immediately. “The fence. The shield. It’s Arkana. I’ve run into this before but I didn’t know what it was. We have to go back, *now.*”

Charis has no idea what’s going on, but Kat has been doing this a lot longer than he has.

“Okay. Hold on,” he warns, then guns the throttle.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The thing with having a monitor, Kat has realized, is that there are tradeoffs. Having a monitor essentially means he has the tree of knowledge as a second brain. On the other hand, because the mainframe can now track his location as soon as he leaves the compound, Kat can't just take his crawler out of the garage anymore. Like Charis—and, until a couple of days ago, Leon—Kat now has to come and go from the compound in a cloaked transport. The other night, he'd had to *fly* the bike out to the plateau to test it, fighting his stupid fucking phobia the entire way.

Today, at least, it had been easy to figure out the logistics. Once they'd made it back, Charis had dropped Kat off at the compound before he'd left for the city again, making for the studio.

"They want to release soon. Within the next month. Which means I have a lot of recording to do."

And then Charis had opened the door—before he let Kat get out, though, Charis reached for him over the center console and kissed him in full view of the guards—and Karra—all of whom had gathered in the hangar.

Kat couldn't help a catlike grin as he passed a sputtering Karra, making sure to knock into his shoulder again as he passed.

Kat reported to Eris in the control room, where the family's own in-house genius then proceeded to attach at least a dozen cables to his left forearm, another to his temple, and a cuff of some kind on his right wrist.

Nothing that broke skin. The ones on top of his monitor each have thin films of metal mounted flat to his skin, held in place with some kind of clip that Eris had to adjust to fit him. The one by his eye is annoying, though. There's a band of some kind that he has to wear to keep the thing in place, and it's really tight.

"Trust me, this is the method you prefer," Eris had said as she'd adjusted the band as well. "Both faster and cleaner."

Well that *isn't ominous at all.*

There's a humming sound that's vaguely melodic, almost like the first part of a transport's ignition sequence, and then Kat's line of thought appears on the screen in front of them.

It isn't all at once. The letters are green and wavy around the edges, black in the center, like the background they're floating against. They appear one at a time, and they're not all the same size. After a beat or two, they fade to black.

"What the fuck."

The letters of that appear on the screen, this time much faster and rimmed in deep red.

Eris smiles. One of her smiles that means she's up to no good, which does not bode well for Kat. "I forgot to warn you. Be careful with your thoughts for a while, this will project images as well."

Kat starts to think a response and then shuts it down. A quick flash of blue makes it through, followed by an image that passes too quickly for Kat to really see it, though it looks like it

might be Charis's face in profile—then there's another noise, this time like a large rock falling onto another. When Kat looks over, Eris is laughing quietly.

"You're much better at this than Rafel. I had to sit through a lot of pornography to get what I needed from him."

She waves Kat over to a box that's outlined on the floor.

The screen goes dark as Kat steps inside, and Eris goes back to her control panel in the middle of the room. A loading bar appears at the bottom of the screen.

"So you don't have to wonder out loud too much, what I'm doing now is connecting to the mainframe through you."

Kat frowns at this. "Why'd you connect Rafel, then? He doesn't have mainframe access," Kat asks out loud, before it can manifest on the screen.

"I didn't need mainframe access that time. Just Earth systems, government channels, that sort of thing. It's easier to use him for that if you're willing to put up with the constant background noise."

"Since they're the only systems he can connect to," Kat reasons.

"Exactly." The loading bar finishes, and the screen in front of them goes from black to white. "Okay, we're in."

It's a very strange thing to see the contents of the mainframe in front of his eyes. After a beat, the white screen in front of them fills with grey through-lines. Some of them are straight and

wire-like, others connected to each other in long, amorphous shapes—rounder in the middle with long branches and fingers extending off the ends.

Kat stares at the screen in front of him, once again shocked to near silence by what's displayed there.

"Are those *neurons?*"

Nerve cells. The cells that run through the brain and spinal cord, then out into the rest of the body, responsible for everything from waking you up, breathing, thinking, remembering, and feeling emotions.

"Yes," Eris says. "Both natural and synthetic."

"Whose are they?"

"Yours."

Kat turns partially around to face Eris. "I thought you wanted to get into the mainframe, not my head."

"Watch your hand," Eris answers.

Kat turns back around. Sure enough—as he'd lifted his hand, the neurons and wires on the screen zoomed by as though he and Eris were watching them pass through a transport window.

"The cuff on your right wrist is how you steer the external rig I have you connected to."

Kat adjusts his stance, moving a bit within the box to see if anything else affects the controls. It doesn't, though why there are so many ports over his monitor is lost on him.

“Don’t tell me we’re about to walk through the entire mainframe to get what you need.”

Eris laughs. Once, loudly. “No. That’s impossible, it’s way too big. Not to mention it’s a quantum computer, so we would need access to multiple iterations of time in order to accurately map its contents. Which we can’t do from here *or* from inside, being constrained by things like linear time and gravity the way we are.”

Kat has no idea what any of that means, but Eris has long since given up on people following everything she says. In a lot of ways, it’s refreshing.

Would you like to know?

“*Hold* on,” Eris says immediately, pausing. “It *talks* to you?”

Kat turns around again, mindful to keep his right hand still this time.

“Sometimes. Does it not talk to everyone?”

Not everyone asks questions that are worth answering.

“I think it likes you, Kat,” Eris says, her voice thick with amusement. “Okay. I’m recording now, so be *very* careful with your thoughts. Show me the database you and Charis found, we’ll start there.”

So they do. Carefully, Kat pulls it up from memory—a bit weird to do when he can watch himself think on the screen, but the government landing page loads easily enough. Rather than watch Kat struggle with the maze of firewalls again, though,

Eris makes quick work of it with a key she'd developed previously with only minimal complaining from Kat.

"It took me over an hour to get through that."

"It would take you around an hour to walk five kilometers, but you can cross that distance in a few seconds with a fast enough transport."

"Point taken."

All things considered, though, watching Eris work is a masterclass in creativity and problem-solving. As Eris explains, while the firewall guarding the database is a maze, it's a set of algorithms she has encountered before in other government databases, and the key she has can run the math to crack the encryption without having to sit there and get through each layer manually. And once they're in, rather than download everything in the incident logs page by page, Eris has another program running to scan and replicate the entire visual contents of the database, which—in her words—allows them to copy its contents without having to de-encrypt them, since they don't need the raw data. Though it's still a little slow, given the size of the database and how long its records go back.

"We don't have to stay in it while it runs, though. Just keep the database open, but feel free to explore."

Kat doesn't have to be told twice. He minimizes the database window, sending to a corner of the screen while the field of neurons and wires takes its place on the screen again.

"You don't have to follow them linearly," Eris says behind him. "In fact, don't. Just think of something you want to know and

it'll take you there, provided what you want to know isn't blocked or outside the mainframe's knowledge."

How does Arkana even work? Kat asks himself.

He'd done it rhetorically, but there's apparently enough intention in his question that the mainframe seems to guess the bounds of what Kat already knows about it. Instead of answering him directly, it takes him through a brief history of the development of the ship: how it had been built in pieces over the course of centuries, starting with the central island and working outward.

But that's only the beginning. One of the strangest things to think about is that the mainframe is, at the end of the day, a physical object. And the mainframe is also *enormous*, contained in the equivalent of the underground heart of the center island, with huge vents and cryochambers integrated throughout to keep the quantum core as cold as possible. Apparently heat creates errors in its processing.

"How does the ship not just freeze?"

Kat states that question aloud.

"You do ask good questions," Eris says.

Eris's answer is not actually an answer, but Kat can tell from her tone that she's amused. And anyway, the mainframe is pouring information into Kat's brain so fast now that the mainframe doesn't even bother to talk to him as it answers.

It's both fascinating and disturbing. Arkana is truly gigantic: from edge to edge of the outer rim, the ship is dozens of

kilometers wide, massive enough that it should not be able to orbit the Earth at the distance it does without being drawn down by Earth's gravitational pull and torn apart in its atmosphere. So powerful is Arkana's own artificial gravity that it is able to sustain its orbit like a smaller, human-made moon, one powerful enough to create its own geologic phenomena.

This immediately registers in Kat's mind as strange. Not as false, but like the mainframe is feeding him information selectively, being cagey with its narration. And had Kat not been investigating the smoke for months by this point, it might have gotten away with it.

Kat has been working with mechanical things since he was old enough to use a socket wrench. He built his crawler nearly from scratch, first by salvaging parts and materials out of wheeled rigs he'd found in the Boneyard and other Scaramandis territory, then by trading repairs for parts where he could and acquiring them by other means where he couldn't. And he's as good with air transports as he is with wheeled ones—with all machines, really. Machines speak a language that Kat is fluent in, provided he has enough time to study the particulars of how any given one runs before attempting to work on it.

And much like the mainframe is, at the end of the day, a physical object, Arkana is, at the end of the day, a machine. And a ship the size of Arkana requires a *lot* of materials. Far more than even a godlike AI can arrange to recycle from the components it has already collected. But while this would explain some of the terraforming—a lot of both mainframe and ship components require the harvesting of massive amounts of rare materials from the Earth's crust in order to manufacture its various parts, something Kat had already worked out even

before he'd gotten his monitor—it doesn't explain other things, like what had happened to over a billion cubic kilometers of ocean water.

And there is no reason for the missing answers, either, considering that the amount of information and knowledge inside Arkana is frankly stupid. Even knowing that everything on the mainframe pertains somehow to the survival of Sacrosancts, there's seemingly nothing it doesn't know.

Why would the mainframe be keeping the knowledge of how the ship sustains itself from its own charges—?

Kat cuts off his own train of thought as another node of suspicion blooms.

It's not just its own physical construction that Arkana maintains so scrupulously, Kat thinks as he pulls up population data from the last five centuries out of a public data bank. It can't be. Birth and death records are maintained by sector, of which there are a total of 88, each named for a constellation. And there are annual summaries from each, along with an annual census.

The number of Sacrosancts on Arkana has essentially never changed. Not since the ship's construction was finished. What's more, the ship has never had a shortage of any of the kinds of people needed to keep it running: it has always had enough engineers, mechanics, hydroponic farmers, doctors, what have you to keep not only *itself* running, but the Sacrosanct population, too. Somehow, no one ever has to compete for business, nor do they ever have to wait in line. They're never sick—not really—and while the society isn't completely egalitarian, no one ever *truly* lacks for anything.

And they're never bored, either. There are robust sports, arts, and leisure scenes, all of which strike a perfect balance between nostalgia and novelty, competition and camaraderie. There's barely even a government on Arkana anymore because the AI is so sophisticated. What's there is a shell government, one designed to preserve the illusion of a democracy.

Arkana doesn't put it to him *quite* that way, but it's what it means.

At that, Kat has to pause.

Because the implications are chilling. Far more than just entertainment preferences or career choices, if Arkana is organizing a government that's supposedly a democracy, then that means it's influencing people's decision-making—their thoughts and preferences, too, probably, in a way that will achieve…what? Its desired results?

There are no desired results. Arkana was designed to care for the human population, a component of which is minimizing exposure to stressors in order to decrease general anxiety.

"So, wait. Do bad things even happen, ever? Is there even crime on Arkana?"

Without Kat's conscious prompting, a threat log appears in the corner of the screen opposite the database window. Kat opens it.

Arrests are rare. Nevertheless, there's a bar of red glow at the top of the screen informing citizens of Arkana about an arrest. A pop-up notification comes up when Kat taps on it, which is a

guide to the colors: yellow is a minor infraction, orange is a misdemeanor, red is a felony.

At the bottom of the pop-up window is a text box—*Would you like to stop receiving these notifications?*—which Kat dismisses without saying yes, instead closing out of the window.

Except when Kat sees the arrest log on the screen, Kat feels his heart drop through the floor.

“Eris.”

“Yes?”

Eris clearly isn’t looking at the projection on the screen, based on how fast she’s typing.

“Disconnect me. Now.”

Kat turns around, sending the neural network flying across the screen under the arrest log.

“What? It’s only halfway copied. If I disconnect you now, it might scramble—oh shit.”

And then Kat is practically ripping the equipment off his arms and face. The screen immediately goes dark.

Kat is out the door before he even realizes he has moved.

“I’ll get a detail following you—!” Kat hears Eris shout from across the room as the door closes.

Kat makes immediately for the hangar and climbs in the first cloaked transport he sees. “Trace him,” he orders his monitor. “I don’t care how. *Trace him.*”

An agonizing couple of minutes later, the coordinates appear in his brain.

The hangar door retracts. Kat guns the throttle so hard he’s thrown back in the seat, a single thought ricocheting in his mind:

Find Charis.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Charis has no idea who took him. He has been in a very cold room for a long time. Whoever took him did something to his eyes that turned them off, stopping him from being able to see.

There's no one in the room right now. Most of the people who have been in and out of it have been speaking in some kind of code, only a handful of the words intelligible. Someone else has arrived in the last few minutes, though, and they are speaking Arkane, but far enough away that it's hard to make out what they're saying.

A sense of cold dread is collecting in Charis's gut as he thinks about the implications of having been taken by Sacrosancts. There's no good option: either someone took him because the mainframe said so, or rogue Sacrosancts like the Scaramandises have him, and who knows what they'll do.

Before Charis's thoughts can tip over the edge into panic, someone turns his eyes back on. Charis blinks a couple of times, quickly re-adjusting to light, then looks up at the person in front of him.

"Hello, little nightingale."

Charis jumps back at the sight of Tauran in front of him, enough that the chair he's sitting in and bound to tips slightly with it. Tauran smiles.

"What a surprise. Or not, is it? Lyricus Mensara the younger, following in the family footsteps?"

What the fuck. Why is Tauran here. *What* is going on—

“I see your brother didn’t warn you about the dangers of getting involved with the syndicates,” Tauran continues. He tips his head slightly. “Oh, wait.”

Charis glares. Tauran just looks at him with that same smile.

Tauran is here, Charis thinks. On Earth, a place he hates. He knows about Karra and Rafel. He knows about the Scaramandis syndicate.

The pieces aren’t fitting together.

“What do you want?”

“What do *I* want?” Tauran laughs, his eyes lighting up in a way that makes Charis very nervous. “Oh, honey. I don’t want anything, my job here is done. Now Ariyen, on the other hand—well. I won’t ruin it.” Tauran leans in closer to Charis’s eye level, hands on his thighs. “But honey, you *have* to be more careful. Do you have *any* idea how easy it was to get you?”

Charis’s mind reels as he tries to mentally reassemble the last few hours. After he’d taken Kat back to the compound, he’d gone straight to the studio—raising a few eyebrows on account of the cloaked transport, but it was easy enough to pin on the extra attention he’d been receiving since his signing a couple of days ago. The lie hadn’t even been hard to tell.

He’d worked for a couple of hours on some riffs for *Red Dawn* before he’d gotten hungry. The studio has a kitchen—it had been late enough in the day that the studio was mostly empty, and there hadn’t been anyone else in the room with him. He’d gotten a drink first—

It hits him, then, what happened. Rather than fear, all Charis feels when he looks at Tauran again is anger.

“Did you *drug* me?”

Tauran stands up again and goes to the door he’d entered through, hand on the handle as he looks at Charis with stone in his eyes. “Bureau of Obedience protocol, darling. There’s simply no way to know whether a rogue Sacrosanct will be hostile.”

His tone is indulgent despite the way he’s looking at Charis, and Charis is so angry at how wrong he’s been about Tauran all this time that he really wants to hit him with the chair he’s in once he gets free.

Whatever they’ve bound his hands with is tough. It doesn’t feel like rope or like metal—like it’s somewhere in between. Experimentally, Charis pulls on it a bit, only for it to tighten slightly.

Tauran closes the door.

“Let me rephrase. There’s no way to know whether a rogue Sacrosanct will be hostile, *unless* he’s still connected to the mainframe.”

At this, Tauran winks.

Charis takes a breath and shoves his anger down. There will be time to be mad later. First, he has to get out.

Quickly, Charis takes stock of his options. They’re obviously not alone—if Charis were to get free, he has no idea where he is,

and whoever had been speaking that weird code outside the door is probably in on whatever Tauran is doing. He can't even tell if he's on Earth or Arkana.

Except wait, Charis thinks. Yes he can. As he looks around the room more, it's obvious they're on Earth. There's dust everywhere, including under his shoes, and there's a vague greyish pallor over everything—from the dust, probably—that tells him that whatever this place used to be, it hasn't been that for a long time.

They can't turn his tracker off without some kind of authorization, either from the mainframe itself or from someone in his close contacts list. That's one thing in his favor, though it's possible that wherever they are is somewhere equipped with signal blockers, like the compound is.

With his hands bound, though, he can't check his ear to see if his private comms link with Karra is still active. Another thing working against him. And obviously, he has no weapons. He doesn't carry them, and even if he did, that's the first thing they would have taken.

There is one thing, though.

Very slowly, careful not to tug on the bands and make them tighten further, Charis curls the fingers of one hand as far as he can toward his wrist, seeing if he can reach the rope.

He can. Barely, and it makes the back of his hand hurt. But it might be enough.

Normally, activating the torch on his finger requires entering a code on his monitor. But something he's been noticing from

Kat in the last couple of days is that Kat basically never enters anything on his. He just thinks things at it and they happen.

It's worth a shot. And Tauran has apparently gotten bored of Charis's silence. He leans against the closed door, arms crossed as he looks at Charis like Charis has tracked dust onto white Vizor carpet.

"Did you know that I was sent to watch over you?"

Torch, Charis thinks.

Nothing happens.

"I don't think you realize who your parents were."

Charis glares at Tauran. Again. "Of course I do."

But Tauran isn't looking at him anymore. He's looking at his nails—which, for once, actually seem to be bare.

Charis tries again, tries visualizing the torch this time. Tries imagining activating it.

"I wish you'd just stayed with the program. Stopped *insisting* on putting out music in common and just *listened.* I warned you, Charis. So many times. Have you even *looked* at your credit score lately?"

Charis blinks. He can't feel the torch when it's active, so he'll just have to try.

Tauran's comment is distracting him, though. Social credits are yet another thing that's unique to Sacrosancts, though Sacrosancts on Earth hardly pay attention to them. On Arkana,

though, social credits are a kind of currency. Having a lot of social credits can't buy you a new jacket, but it *can* make it easier for you to get into clubs, secure business deals, and even, if you've had a good score for a long time, to grant entry into some exclusive social circles in Central Command.

Since Charis was born into those social circles and also happens to be a celebrity, his social credit score is not something he's had to pay attention to for a long time. His reputation is enough to get him whatever he wants. It's been months since he checked his.

Charis meets Tauran's eyes with a glare cold enough to freeze blood anyway.

"I can't, I'm tied up," Charis says, affecting more confidence than he feels.

Tauran barks a laugh at this, the harshness quickly bleeding out into a giggle. "Ah, how could I forget. Let me help."

Tauran comes to stand behind the chair and leans into Charis's space, positioning his left arm so the holoscreen hovering over it is in Charis's line of sight.

Charis's social credit score is up on it, the balance deeply, *deeply* red. But even though it doesn't matter for him, Charis still flinches—then is immediately irritated again, because obviously Tauran noticed.

Tauran hums a laugh, stows the holoscreen, and resumes his place in front of Charis.

“Chay, darling, whatever will we do with you,” Tauran muses, studying his nails again. He picks a bit at one of his cuticles with a frown. “And here I was hoping you would prove me wrong, little nightingale.”

Charis brings his finger to the rope.

There is an *instant* wave of pain, brutally hot in a way that sends a jolt that feels like fire up his entire arm. There’s also a faint hissing sound like a welding torch.

Fuck. The thing is somehow metallic. He’s going to have to melt it against his skin if he wants to get free, and if it makes noise, there’s no way Tauran won’t hear it.

Charis grimaces, quickly turning it into a scowl. Already his body is starting to heal the nascent burn. “Don’t call me that. Not if you’re going to kill me anyway.”

Tauran looks up at him again and smiles, the expression utterly belying his next words. “Look. I get no joy out of this. But between insurrectionist propaganda, involvement with a known criminal syndicate, and now active mainframe sabotage, you’re too much of a wildcard. Too much of a risk.”

The last two are true, but *insurrectionist propaganda* sparks both outrage and a warning, one Charis files away for later. Once he’s out.

“So what are you going to do, then?”

There’s a beat, then Tauran crosses over to Charis and stands behind the chair. Charis quickly extinguishes his finger just as

Tauran runs his hands most of the way down Charis's bound arms.

"It's a little bit silly that they tied you up. Yen likes to play with his food." He bends down, resting his chin on Charis's shoulder. "And you were *not* supposed to get that close to the fence."

And that's all Tauran can get out because the next second, a door on the other side of the room slams open and there are bullets flying around. Real ones. A beat later, Tauran is hauling a bound Charis out of the chair and holding him in front of him like a human shield. A beat after *that,* someone rips Tauran's hands off him and Charis turns to see Kat with Tauran in a chokehold, holding a gun to his throat.

Which is, of course, when the door Tauran had come in through opens and in walks Yen, who walks straight toward Charis and puts a gun to his temple.

Also a real one.

"You give me mine back and I'll give you yours," Yen says to Kat.

"What about Petra?" Kat practically growls.

Charis can't see Yen's face, but he imagines that Yen is scowling.

"I never have liked negotiating with you, Kat. You're too stern. It's no fun."

Yen cocks the gun. There's both fear and fury in Kat's eyes as he digs his gun into Tauran's throat enough to make him choke.

“The problem is, if I shoot him, that’s one and done and I lose my leverage over you, since he’s the only thing I’ve ever seen you care about.”

“You don’t want me,” Kat grounds out.

Yen barks a laugh. “Correct, as always. You’re your father’s son.”

More shots. This time from outside, and this time with shouting and the hum of transports in close ground proximity, followed by the sound of suspension pegs landing on rough concrete. And just then, Tauran’s wrist lights up red—he looks down at it and his eyes go wide. “Yen—?”

The look on Kat’s face changes. Charis can’t place what it changed to.

“*Fuck* that was fast,” Yen says in Charis’s ear, just above a whisper. “This wasn’t the fucking *plan*—”

Explosions ring out outside, big enough to rattle the windows and the floor under their feet. Charis hears part of the building collapse and screams—Yen releases Charis, and at Kat’s split second of surprise, Tauran breaks free and runs out of the room, not even bothering to close the door.

Yen lowers the gun and puts the safety back on—apparently stuffing it somewhere, because the next thing Charis knows, Yen is sliding the metal rope around Charis’s wrist and spinning something in a pattern. A beat later, Charis is free.

“Get him home safely. *Now.* I’ll deal with Tauran.”

And then Yen leaves, entering a code on his monitor as he runs in the direction Tauran had just gone. Kat holsters his gun.

"I will *fucking* kill him. Using *you* as bait for an enforcement job—"

Kat looks at Charis and there's nothing but shock and relief on his face, despite his words. Until another explosion rings out outside. One of the narrow windows near the ceiling blows out with it and another cracks, and Kat grabs Charis by the waist and drops down, covering him as best he can, and Charis wants to fight out of it but Kat is so much stronger than him it's a little bit ridiculous, considering they're nearly the same height and build.

Charis also feels weird, like he can't quite make his body move right. The residual effects of whatever drug Tauran had given him. Even if he and Kat *were* evenly matched, they wouldn't be right now.

"What is going on?!"

Kat reaches around and runs his fingers along Charis's collarbone. They're cold, and the touch drips down through his chest like a stream down a hillside. It's actually really grounding. "A team followed me here. We need to get outside once they clear this place—"

And then there's a loud, male scream from outside. From the slivers of window they can see, there are white boots on the ground, along with a lot of voices they don't recognize, and one says something into his monitor that Charis hears as clearly through the broken window as though the person were right in front of him:

“Permanchera tataset, leyanin uchanit, ik ya id lomakorn,” Charis hears from outside.

Target located. Perimeter sweep, no one in or out.

As Charis is about to say something, Kat puts a hand over his mouth. Charis makes a questioning noise as Kat swears under his breath.

“Dammit.”

“What?” Charis attempts to say.

“It’s not the family outside. It’s Arkana.”

Kat doesn’t have to say anything else. Charis knows what it means.

They’re on their own.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kat looks down at his monitor. There's a line of text from Pax confirming what he already knows.

—This place is crawling with Arkanene military. We can't get in. Looking for an alternative.

"I know," Kat says to his monitor, watching as the text transcribes. "Stay out of sight and cloak yourselves as much as possible. Find Yen. I'll get Chay out."

He sends it before he can think twice and surveys the room.

The room appears to have been a lab of some kind, once—full of bar-height tables with sinks at one end, with cabinets along two of the four sides of the room whose labels have long since been rendered unreadable. Many are marked with signs indicating that their contents are poisonous or explosive. There is even one in the corner with thicker doors than the rest that looks like it once held something radioactive, though the door to that one is ajar and it's obviously empty now.

The lab is just one in a building full of them, the whole building one of *many* empty buildings around. Almost like this place had once been a university or something. Few of the locks work anymore, but unbelievably, Charis's captors had done Kat the favor of turning a light on in the room where they had him.

Either they're stupid, or they believe it doesn't matter if they're found. Kat knows which one he prefers. He fires off a quick message to Yen.

—Tauran?

About ten seconds later, there's a response.

—Done.

Kat lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He's furious with Yen, but relieved that he's alive.

"Kat *what* is going on?"

"Hang on." Pax sends Kat a set of coordinates. Kat sends one back, then passes the one from Pax to Yen, which is about all he can do for Yen at this point.

More gunfire outside. Charis winces beside him.

There are potentially three exit routes, if they were to count the broken window in the corner. But that one is well off ground level and there's probably no way to get out through it without drawing attention, even if it's big enough to fit through. It's hard to tell from where they are right now, huddled behind one of the lab stations.

Which leaves the two doors—the one Kat had come through and the one Yen and Tauran had left through. Reflexively, Kat stills Charis beside him and listens as carefully as he can.

Which is pretty damn carefully, now. The monitor has augmented his natural senses in a way Kat could never have fathomed before, and it's only a few seconds of listening before he hears the sound of people approaching the lab, obviously drawn to the light. A couple of beats later and it's obvious they're coming from the second hall, the one Tauran and Yen had left through.

“Chay, here’s what we’re going to do,” he begins.

More gunfire. This time it’s accompanied by shouts in Arkane and the whizzing, humming sound of several bolts from a plasma cannon, and a sense of dread latches deep talons into Kat’s gut and squeezes. He steels himself, trying to block it out and *focus.*

“We’re going to go through the door I came through. Turn your night vision on and be ready to deploy a shield.”

“Kat,” Charis says. His voice is small and wavering, and he looks smaller than Kat has ever seen him. He slides his hand into Kat’s. “I’m scared.”

Kat squeezes his hand. “I know, baby, I am too. But it’s like you told me on the transport—just turn it off. We’re going to get out.”

Charis takes a sharp breath, and from where he’s curled into Kat’s side, Kat feels him nod.

“Turn off your monitor’s backlight and stay low,” Kat says.

Charis nods again, and Kat holds Charis’s hand as they make their way out of the lab, Kat constantly scanning up and down every hall and corner they pass for signs or sounds either of the Arkanenes or the people who’d been with Tauran. They’d been dressed like the sorts of people who hang around the Boneyard, armed with guns rather than the knives and handheld weapons that marauders carry, but there’s one with her Earth-style sleeve rolled up.

She has a monitor.

He and Charis round another corner. An old, dilapidated exit sign is mounted above one of the doors.

And then there are footsteps in the hallway. They're not quiet, either, which gives them away as Arkanene even before the telltale blueish flashlights from their skin monitors light up the hallway.

"Shit," Kat swears under his breath. He pulls Charis back around the corner and puts a hand over his mouth again, which Charis then licks.

"Stop that."

Closer. Too close. Kat throws up a shield mere milliseconds before the light from the soldier's flashlight hits them square in the face.

The soldier is looking through the scope of his plasma rifle, but as soon as he realizes what he's looking at, he lowers his gun.

Shields are nearly transparent. The soldier can definitely see through it, and Kat locks eyes with the Arkanene in front of him for a couple long beats.

"It's fine, it's just a couple of Sacrosanct kids," the soldier says in Arkane, addressing a second soldier over his shoulder.

The men in front of him are huge. Probably half again his weight and all muscle. Fighting two of them in hand-to-hand combat will be very difficult if it comes to that. Which means that their best bet right now is almost certainly to look and play the part the soldiers think they're playing, then make a break

for it once they're outside, so Kat resists the urge to feel for his gun through his pocket as the second soldier looks at the first.

"This one doesn't even look old enough to drive, do you think they were kidnapped?"

"I don't know," the first soldier answers. He turns back to Kat and Charis, speaking slowly as he does so. "Did those people outside take you?"

Kat looks at Charis. Charis's eyes are so wide that he can't answer, so Kat nods.

"Will you let us help you get out?" The first soldier asks.

Kat pretends to be too stunned to speak, too. The second soldier looks at the first.

"They look shell-shocked."

The first soldier nods. "Let me see your monitor, let's see if we can't find your parents—"

And then Kat's shield drops. Kat hadn't ordered it to do so, but the first soldier is reaching for Charis's forearm and Kat instinctively tightens his hold around Charis's waist.

"They want to see your monitor," Kat says in the common language, once again feigning ignorance.

Charis glances up at Kat in what appears to be real confusion. "I understand them," he replies in common, the question clear in his face. Kat gives him a look he hopes conveys the act he's trying to get at.

“Show them,” he tells Charis in Arkane.

There’s a beat, then Charis extends his left forearm. The soldiers are apparently equipped with high enough security clearance that they can bypass Charis’s close contacts restrictions and get into his monitor on their own, something that is troubling enough that Kat doesn’t think about it too long, in the off chance they can hear his thoughts.

“*Ishada.* Looks like there won’t be any parents coming.” The first soldier pauses, looking at Charis with a look Kat can’t read. “Got picked up for a joyride, hm? Probably just an accident. Let’s get rid of that, clearly you’ve learned your lesson.”

Kat glances down. The soldier has pulled up Charis’s discipline log. There are a few lines entered in it, along with dates and times, and it’s a bit hard to read them upside down, but most of them are within the last twenty-four hours. The soldier smiles at Charis with a look that’s simultaneously indulgent and disappointed.

Then he enters something called an Obedience Protocol, and the entries in Charis’s discipline log disappear.

Something about this does not feel right.

“Why did you do that?” The second soldier asks, echoing Kat’s thoughts. Once again, the first soldier glances at the second over his shoulder.

“You don’t think they’ve been through enough today?” He turns back to Kat and Charis and smiles, releasing Charis’s arm. “Come on, ignore him. Let’s go.”

The first soldier starts walking down toward the exit Kat had been leading Charis toward without making sure they are following. Kat looks at Charis, making sure none of his own unease shows through as he puts a hand at Charis's back. "You're doing well. I'm right behind you," he says in Charis's ear in the common language, low enough that it's obviously meant for Charis only but also loud enough that the soldiers will hear.

Charis looks back at him. There's still fear in his eyes, but also a question. Then the second soldier coughs, the moment is broken, and they're following the first soldier down the dark corridor while the second follows behind.

The second soldier growls something into his monitor in Arkane that's too mixed up with military code for Kat to tell what he's saying. From his tone and the lack of gunfire or other noise outside, though, Kat expects to see a lot of rubble when they open the door.

"Building's clear," the second soldier says to the first. The first nods.

"Right, then. Let's get you two home."

Kat doesn't have to ask to know that they're talking about Arkana. As they pass through the door the first soldier is holding open for them, Kat steels himself for what he's about to do.

Except there's no need. As soon as the door is closed behind the four of them, there's a blinding light from somewhere that whites out Kat's night vision, then a skull-piercing noise sounds out at a frequency that has Kat dropping immediately to the

ground, covering his ears and crouching down to keep the light out of his eyes, so bright it's painful even behind his eyelids.

"Kat—!"

Kat can barely hear Charis through the sound grenade. After a couple of beats, though, he can feel Charis pressed against him from shoulder to hip, and his monitor vibrates in a pattern that makes Kat want to melt with relief.

The ground rumbles beneath them. An explosion from somewhere behind them produces enough force that Kat feels a wave of it at his back, even though he can't see or hear it clearly. And then there are hands at his shoulders and a soundblocker band claps down over his ears and *finally*, Kat can lower his hands.

He still can't open his eyes, though. He feels for Charis, and their fingers brush for a split second before Kat is yanked forward into a run.

As they near the edge of the field of light, Kat squints through the dissipating refractive fog just as his rescuer drags him up a lowered transport door. Charis is right behind him. The transport is moving again before the door is even all the way closed.

Vyk and Mako pull off their antirefractive face masks almost at the same time, sending puffs of the mirrored dust from the grenade flying through the fuselage as Mako throws his at the pilot's chair where Pax is seated. Vyk sags against the wall by the door until she's sitting on the floor, her breath coming hard.

“One more,” Pax warns.

“One more what?”

Vyk and Mako grab the nearest handles. Kat grabs Charis by the waist and pulls him into the first open seats he sees.

They’re in the bomber, Kat dimly registers as he lets his head drop back against the headrest, still holding Charis against him. They’re already airborne. A second later, a hatch below the floor opens and the transport banks a hard left.

“Let it rip, Petra,” he hears Yen say behind him.

The bomber drops its cargo, and Pax guns the throttle as hard as he can before the warhead even hits the ground.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Charis next wakes, he's in his bed. Kat is there. Charis has no idea how they got to his house, when they arrived, or what time it is, except that it's dark outside and the lights are out, and the only light in the room other than moonlight is from a holoscreen on its dimmest setting that's hovering about a foot above Kat's face.

As Charis tries to turn toward Kat, who is reclining against the headboard on several pillows as he reads, the room suddenly tips as a wave of spinning, nauseating vertigo almost literally knocks him sideways.

"Angel," Kat says quietly as he stows the holoscreen.

Charis curls into Kat with a groan, bringing an arm over his face as he waits for the nausea to pass. He feels the bed shift slightly as Kat changes position, then feels Kat's hand in his hair carding gently through.

It doesn't pass quickly. It's at least a few minutes before the room stops spinning, and several more after that before he stops feeling like he's about to fall over even though he's already laying down. The nausea is the last thing to go.

Kat's hand never stops moving. At least, not until it stops enough that Charis scoots in closer to Kat, bringing the arm over his eyes to Kat's chest. At that, Kat tucks Charis in even closer, close enough that he can press his lips to the top of Charis's head.

He hasn't changed, Charis realizes. Kat's shoes are off, but Charis still feels the cool of Kat's white leather jacket against his

skin. The shirt Charis's fingers are curled in still smells like gunpowder and the ancient dust that had been in that place where Tauran had taken him. There's probably dust all over his bedsheets.

Charis smiles at that thought, even though his heart is currently breaking.

Up until today—or yesterday, because Charis still has no idea how long it's been since Kat brought him home—Charis has had zero reason to believe Tauran had any ill intent toward him. Suddenly he's brought back to the night after the bout at the Boneyard, how he'd felt when the floor had first fallen out from under him as he'd realized, in painstaking detail, just how much the people he cared about most in this world had lied to him in the name of protecting him.

"Am I really that bad a judge of character?" Charis says to Kat's shirt.

He isn't expecting a response, so he's surprised when Kat shifts onto his back again, pulling Charis with him until Charis rests his head against Kat's shoulder. He seems like he has something to say, so Charis just traces lines against the sleeve of Kat's jacket and waits.

After a long moment, Kat's other hand tracks down his side and under the hem of his shirt. Charis's breath catches as Kat runs his thumb around the edge of Charis's stab wound. He feels Kat let out a breath.

"Angel, this is now the fourth time something bad has happened to you because of me."

Charis tries to sit up quickly enough that between his wound pulling in a way that's really uncomfortable and Kat's apparently solid metal arm closing around him and holding him down, Charis can't move. Which is a problem, because Kat apparently has this so backwards that Charis absolutely cannot let it stand, and he really wants to look Kat in the eyes right now.

"Kat—" Charis brings a hand to Kat's wrist, just below the sleeve of his jacket, and tries to look up at him. "I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about Tauran."

Kat's fingers still over his wound as Kat flattens his hand over it.

"If Yen didn't kill him, I will," Kat answers. After a beat, he huffs a laugh. "*After* I kill Yen for using you as bait for an enforcement job."

"That's a lot of murder," Charis says as the crick that's forming in his neck starts to really hurt. He rests his head back against Kat, trying not to completely bluescreen at the feel of Kat's hand over half his waist. "No need to kill your family on my account."

"Just trying to make your case for you."

Charis swats at Kat's hand over his wound, then immediately regrets his choices as a quick jolt of pain flashes through it and into his core.

"Stop that," Charis says through a wince. When Kat goes to free his hand, though, Charis pushes down on it enough to stop him, even though that also hurts.

“Stop what?”

When Kat stops fighting him, Charis reaches behind him and pokes Kat’s shoulder. Hard.

“Only the first one was your fault. The rest were as much my decision as yours.”

Kat does not seem to believe him, if the incredulous look on his face when Charis glances at him again is any indication.

“Angel, do you know why Tauran took you?”

Charis bites his lip, thinking about it for a moment, then shakes his head. “No. And honestly, I don’t really care right now. Besides—” Charis opens his monitor and pulls something up, then hits *project,* making a small holoscreen materialize with the day’s news report from Arkana. “It doesn’t matter. He’s dead.”

Charis hadn’t actually checked yet, but even before it became headline news, there is a part of him that had known. It’s that part that is making his feelings complicated, wrapped up in his anger and grief at Tauran’s betrayal the way it is. Tauran had drugged and kidnapped him, yes, and had apparently been prepared to see him killed—but he’d also been Charis’s mentor and supporter for six years, almost like a second big brother. Now Charis has lost that too.

“Besides, it’s not like I can really go anywhere,” Charis adds, stowing the screen again.

Kat completely stills under him. “Chay—”

"—*Nor* do I want to," Charis quickly continues, cutting off Kat's incoming wall of self-deprecation before it can build. "Everyone I care about is with your family, *including you,* so you guys are stuck with me."

After a beat, Kat lets out a long breath. Then he brings his hand around the underside of Charis's jaw and tips his face up and back.

Despite Kat's words, there's nothing tentative in this kiss, a fact confirmed when Charis shifts positions and turns into Kat, throwing an arm over Kat's shoulder, and Kat's response is to make a noise against his mouth that makes Charis swoon and slide his hand further up under Charis's shirt.

Charis is *obsessed* with Kat's hands. He's obsessed with how rough and skilled they are, and also how lethal—but *also* how they can hold him like this and make Charis feel safer than he's ever felt with anyone other than Karra.

Kat tracks his hand up Charis's front, from the stab wound in his side, then up his abs, his course agonizingly slow. Charis doesn't miss how Kat's eyes linger on his scars, almost like he's contrasting the old with the new—the thin, nearly colorless lines on his chest versus the still-bright remnants of his stab wound. Charis has a passing thought of how that might look when healed that makes him preen a little with pride.

Charis knows what he looks like. His career choices require him to maintain a pretty high level of physical fitness, and besides that, he and Leon have been getting up to no good for years, running around through dangerous parts of the city, climbing onto rooftops and vaulting off walls. He knows he looks good.

This is different, though. Kat is touching Charis like he's worshipping him. And not the way Charis's fans do. Until Kat pulls back with a wince and a groan and lets his head drop back to the headboard, stilling Charis as he tries to follow.

"Angel, you're not healed yet."

Charis does *not* smack his foot against the bed, but it's a near thing.

"Stop trying to be good. If you haven't figured out by now that I like bad boys, you haven't been paying attention," Charis snaps back.

Charis's arm is still around Kat's shoulders, so he uses it for leverage as he sits up, wincing a bit, and turns around until he's straddling Kat's hips on his knees. "Want to guess what I'm thinking about?"

Kat is looking at him now, his eyes pitch black. There's the faintest flush of red up the sides of his neck. The hand that's still on Charis's side moves down to his hip and tightens.

"That's your superpower, not mine."

"Ah, so it is," Charis replies, dipping his fingers under the hem of Kat's shirt. When Kat's muscles immediately jump under his touch, Charis bites back a grin. "I'm thinking I still want to know what happened to your scar after you got your monitor."

Charis arcs a brow, an imitation of Kat's expression that makes Kat smile a bit, then hooks his wrist so that the hem of Kat's shirt is resting on it as he starts to run his hand up the plane of Kat's abs. As he does, he watches Kat, ready to stop in case his

no really is because he doesn't want this. But Kat hasn't actually stopped him yet, and he can feel Kat watching him as he inches Kat's shirt back and up high enough to reveal the scar from the marauder attack at the gorge.

It's still there. Charis smiles. It's at a much later stage of healing than it would have been without Kat's monitor, but the wound had already healed enough by the time Kat had gotten it that his monitor couldn't completely stop the scar from forming. Charis can't see it very well in this light, but he can feel the raised edge of the scar tissue as he runs his thumb along it.

"Can you still feel it?" Charis asks.

"No more than any of my other ones," Kat answers, already a little breathless.

Kat is way stronger than him. Charis already knows that, but it's—different, with him. Kat's body is a testament to how hard he has fought to survive, his strength a product of necessity rather than an aesthetic choice like his own. He is, as Charis had suspected, *completely* shredded, and if Charis weren't already on top of him this knowledge alone would have gotten him there before either of them realized he'd moved.

He looks at Kat through his lashes. "Michal Scaramandis. May I please take your clothes off?"

Kat's hand tightens over Charis's hip hard enough to bruise as he takes a sharp breath, closing his eyes for a few beats. Charis's hand is over Kat's heart, now, and he can feel it pick up under his fingers.

“Yes,” Kat says on a breath, bringing his other hand to Charis’s waist. He opens his eyes. “But only if I can take yours off too.”

“Deal,” Charis agrees, then pushes Kat’s jacket over his shoulders.

Kat takes the hint, sitting forward enough to pull it the rest of the way off before tossing it to the other end of the bed. He’s immediately all over Charis, shoving his hands up Charis’s shirt on both sides, front and back, quickly pushing it up as far as he can. Charis reaches under his arm and pulls it over his head and tosses it somewhere just as Kat pulls him closer again, swearing in Arkane through his teeth.

“*Varaisho,*” he grounds out in his grounder accent, pressing his lips to Charis’s sternum just under the three thin titanium bars that form an inverted triangle on his chest, bridging the two sides of his ribs.

It’s an odd piercing, Charis knows that. And it isn’t really a piercing. In addition to his top surgery scars, Charis had been born with a congenital heart defect, one that had been too dangerous to attempt to fix before he was born. Very shortly after, before he’d even gotten his monitor, he’d had surgery to fix it, a procedure that had involved opening his chest to insert a valve in his heart that had not formed correctly, resulting in only half his heart being able to pump blood. The pins, which had grown with Charis as he’d aged, had been inserted to hold his ribcage closed after the surgery, reducing fusion error while the monitor integrated with his nervous system, then synced with the rest of his body.

He could have had them removed a long time ago. But he likes them, so he’s never bothered.

“What are you,” Kat sighs against his skin.

Charis brings one hand into Kat’s hair, the other under his shirt again. “Horny,” he quips. He feels more than hears Kat’s amused huff.

Kat sits back enough that Charis can pull his shirt off, too, which Charis does with gusto, throwing it off wherever he’d thrown his own. Then he sinks down onto Kat until he’s sitting more than kneeling across Kat’s thighs, his legs still bracketing Kat’s.

Charis moves in for a kiss, but Kat doesn’t let him. Instead, he intercepts Charis, tipping Charis’s head to the side and burying a hand in his hair as he makes for Charis’s neck. Which is how Charis learns Kat is a biter, because he latches onto Charis’s pulse point and sucks a savage mark into the delicate skin there, one Charis is sure will bruise. At least for a couple of hours.

At Charis’s contented sigh, Kat folds Charis into him and Charis brings an arm over Kat’s shoulder again, this time learning the tracks of Kat’s scars with his hands. Many of these are not as smooth as the one from the marauder attack a few weeks ago, and when Charis shivers he’s not sure whether it’s from the scars or Kat’s teeth. He gasps, bucking a little bit forward into Kat, and evidently all of Kat’s hesitancy is gone, because the arm around his back drops down and tightens as Kat slides a hand under his waistband and inhales sharply, sounding almost frustrated as he palms at Charis’s ass.

“You’ll be the death of me.”

At this, Charis bites his lip, fighting a smile. He suspects he knows why but he wants to hear Kat say it. “What? That’s not good, we were having so much fun—”

Charis’s wisecrack is cut off at the root when, quick as a flash, Kat slides out from beneath him and lays Charis out on the mound of pillows beside him. In the next blink, he’s on top of Charis, this time knocking Charis’s legs apart and straddling one, one arm simultaneously beneath Charis and holding himself up as he unfastens Charis’s jeans one-handed and shoves his hand down the front.

Charis gasps, clutching at Kat’s shoulder as Kat‘s fingers skate lower, then lower, their tips grazing his entrance. Then he stops. Charis mewls in protest, nearly loud enough to drown Kat’s amused huff.

“Don’t s—”

“I wasn’t going to,” Kat whispers. “I’m just checking in.”

He’s stroking slowly with the rest of his hand, the motions rhythmic, tiny tracks of his fingers into and out of Charis’s body. And it’s not enough. Charis whines again, but when he tries to hook his free leg around Kat, Kat catches Charis’s ankle under his own leg and pins him, then slides a whole finger in and crooks it forward.

Charis’s back wants to arch up, his hips to thrust into Kat’s hand, but Kat is pinning Charis with his strength, not just his weight. He bends back over Charis, laving at one of Charis’s chest scars with his tongue as he continues to stroke. First one finger, then two. Not fast or hard enough to finish Charis off, but enough that before long Charis can hear the sound of it in

the room as Kat gathers Charis's leaking precome with every pass of his hand.

Charis whines and gropes at Kat's arms, shoulders, anything as Kat strokes him off, trying and failing to find purchase *somewhere*. He feels Kat smile against the skin of his chest. The skin there is so sensitive it makes Charis feel like he's on a live wire.

"You're the one that said you didn't want me to be good, Angel."

"I did, didn't I?!"

"Mmh." Kat rakes his teeth along the line of Charis's pectoral, then licks across it before leaving a mark there too, just beside the bars on Charis's chest. "Are you rethinking that now?"

"I wouldn't dare. Do your worst," Charis gasps out.

Once again, Kat laughs against his skin, then looks up at Charis with the darkest, most dangerous look Charis has ever seen on him. Maybe on anyone. "I think I'm going to wait until you're fully healed before I do that."

Charis's stomach flips. Kat tightens his grip and smiles, dark as that look, and *fuck* Charis is so gone.

In the face of Kat's full-frontal *assault* like this, it's an embarrassingly short time before Charis's vision starts to go white around the edges. He clutches at Kat's shoulder. "Kat, please, I'm so close—"

Kat gives one more stroke and pulls his hand free, then sits up on his knees. Charis bites back a sob.

“Oh, no, Angel. I’m not letting you off that easily.”

“Rude.”

Kat dips his fingers back inside Charis’s jeans, though not where Charis needs him, instead drawing them up the seam of his groin, then along the curve of his hipbone. “And here I thought you liked that about me.”

For a few seconds, Charis’s world narrows down to the feel of Kat’s fingers and the incredibly smug, but *incredibly* sexy look of satisfaction as Kat sees what a mess he’s made of Charis so quickly. Something flashes in his eyes, then, but before Charis can even think about how that look does not bode well for him Kat is crawling over him until their faces are aligned, then running a hand slowly up Charis’s entire front, over his chest scars, then up and around his neck before he dips down and kisses Charis, licking into his open mouth in a way that’s somehow every bit as obscene as what his hands had been doing to Charis’s core just a minute ago.

Unpinned, now, Charis throws both arms around Kat’s neck, trying to pull him down so their bodies are flush. But Kat won’t budge, instead bracing easily on his forearms as he nips at Charis’s lower lip.

Charis knows what he’s doing. He knows Kat is protecting Charis’s wound, and doing it effortlessly while teasing Charis to within an inch of his life.

“Not yet, baby,” Kat says against Charis’s lips, apparently reading his mind.

“*Kat,*” Charis whines. “*Please,* I want to feel you.”

“Oh?” He nips at Charis’s lip again but pulls back before Charis can get his tongue in his mouth. Charis could cry. “How can I say no when you ask so nicely?”

Once again, Kat moves before Charis can even blink, and this time he slides both hands under Charis’s ass and pulls his jeans down, then over his hips. Before they’re all the way off, he looks up at Charis again with one of those dark looks.

“So you *are* wearing underwear.”

Charis scoffs. “Yeah, I just don’t like panty lines. You didn’t notice before?”

Charis didn’t even get dressed this morning expecting to get laid. The thong he’s currently wearing is mostly just so his jeans don’t chafe and is far from the sexiest thing in his drawer. But Kat is rolling the band over his fingers, looking at Charis like he isn’t sure which part of him he wants to eat first.

“I don’t know whether I want this on or off,” Kat says.

“*Off,*” Charis protests. “*Please,* Kat. I’ll wear one you can play with later—”

Kat yanks it down Charis’s hips with a growl that goes *straight* through Charis, pulling it the rest of the way off along with his jeans and then chucking both off the side of the bed. But he’s right back, and Charis instinctively draws one knee up to make

room while Kat rakes his eyes up and down Charis's body, now naked but for the platinum chain around his neck. He runs his hand along the underside of Charis's leg.

"Gorgeous," Kat says under his breath.

Charis sits up on his elbows. The way Kat is just looking at him and petting him is driving Charis more than a little insane.

"What are you doing?"

"Scanning you," Kat says with a smirk. "Why settle for mapping your body with my eyes when I can have a perfect three-dimensional replica anytime I want?"

Kat has been Sacrosanct for a week, Charis thinks. How is Kat so much better at it than Charis when Charis has literally been Sacrosanct his entire life?

"You can have the real thing if you just get on with it—"

Kat throws Charis's bent leg over his shoulder, and that's all the warning he gets before Kat pins his hips, lowers his head, and licks along, slow stripe across Charis's whole entrance.

Every time. *Every* time Kat does something that's the hottest thing Charis has ever seen, Kat immediately one-ups himself. When Charis's hips buck up instinctively into Kat's mouth, Kat just pins him harder, drawing back until only the tip is still inside before doing something with his tongue that about makes Charis's arms collapse out from under him.

When Kat eventually shifts so that his arm is under Charis's lower back, tipping Charis's hips forward for better access,

Charis's arms *do* collapse out from under him, and Charis winces enough with the way the short fall pulls at his wound that Kat pulls off with a concerned look, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"S'nothing. Please don'stop," Charis gasps out, trying to remember what words are.

That dark flash is back in Kat's eyes, though. "I think I like it when you beg."

Without waiting for Charis's response, he licks across Charis's entrance with the flat of his tongue again before repeating the motion inside, this time curling his tongue forward until he's sucking Charis down, letting Charis feel the way his throat is working around him before pulling off completely and sucking a constellation of marks into Charis's thigh, then taking Charis in his mouth again.

At this point, still tired from the drug and half out of his body under Kat's relentless attention, Charis has no fight left. And Kat must have known the moment Charis gave in, because it isn't long at all before Kat wraps both arms under Charis's back and works him until Charis is spilling into his mouth with a long moan, swallowing everything like it's effortless, licking Charis clean of the remnants, then tugging his own waistband down enough to free his—

"Holy shit," Charis says aloud.

He's back up on his elbows again, his whole body still alight and buzzing with the aftershocks of the best orgasm of his life, and Kat is up on his knees now and has one hand still on Charis's thigh, the other around a cock Charis is going to dream about

having inside of him for the foreseeable future until it happens. Barely a dozen strokes and Kat is spilling into his own hand with a shudder and a gasp, his other hand sliding up and down Charis's leg and side as he trembles with the force of it.

After what feels like a year, Kat wipes his hand off on his pants before pulling them off along with his underwear, rolling them into a ball and tossing them into the pile of their things off the side of the bed. He moves up to where Charis is still half-lying across the mound of pillows and curls up to him, pulling him into his chest.

This time, when they kiss, there's nothing urgent about it, both of them sluggish and sated. Charis winds his legs around Kat's and turns onto his side, sliding a hand into Kat's hair. It's a little damp beneath. Charis smiles into the kiss.

"What?" Kat asks after a beat.

"Look at you doing all the work, making sure I don't exert myself too much."

Charis sees more than hears Kat's laugh at this as he rolls onto his back, bringing Charis's arm with him. He laces his fingers through Charis's over the back of Charis's hand, running his thumb along the side. "I don't think you understand how sexy you are."

"I mean, I know a little bit," Charis says, laying his cheek on Kat's shoulder so he can look up at him. "It's kind of my job."

"Mmh. Right, a real man of the people."

Ugh. The one part of his career that Charis has never stopped finding weird. Over half a decade in and Charis is still not fully used to the amount of attention he gets when he goes…basically anywhere, at least in public. It's why he and Leon got into the habit of sneaking around.

"You sound like Deja," Charis says, turning his face down into Kat's chest. "My agent."

"I remember. The one who was completely useless after you were stabbed."

Charis looks up at Kat again. "Hey. In her defense, dealing with the aftermath of the sort of violent attacks that basically never happen on Arkana is not part of her job description."

"That's not an excuse."

Charis shrugs and rolls over onto his back, keeping their hands linked. "That's not what's on your mind right now, though."

After a few beats, Kat shakes his head. Charis hears it against the pillow. "No." A long sigh, then he follows Charis, squeezing his hand and letting it go before rolling onto his side and propping his head up on his hand. "My father wants to talk to you."

Charis frowns at this. "Why? I don't know anything that's useful to him."

Kat shakes his head again. "It's not that. It's Arkana. The prime directive."

"…I don't follow."

Kat takes a long breath and lets it out before speaking again.

“It’s basically like this: Arkana is like the ultimate rival gang. It’s sucking the planet dry of resources to keep those with the blood alive. In less than 20 years, Arkana will run out of the resources it needs to sustain the human population it’s responsible for.”

It takes a long moment for this knowledge to fully register. When it does, it hits Charis like a lead blanket, one that sends a deep cold sinking through Charis all the way to his bones.

The way Sacrosanct children learn about it in school, the mainframe’s purpose is to support the population it recognizes as human, helping them to survive and to develop advanced technologies designed to help them and the mainframe communicate better with each other. As Charis had learned over the last few weeks, though, that wasn’t *quite* an accurate description of the prime directive. Far from merely making their lives easier, Arkana’s prime directive was, in fact, to keep humanity alive—*no matter what that took*.

Charis frowns again. “Wait, hang on. So Arkana is slowly destroying the Earth so that the ship doesn’t break down. Why is it blocking those areas off…?”

Kat shrugs underneath him. “I don’t really know. Maybe it doesn’t want people to be anxious.”

“So it blocks off the sky so that people can’t see what it’s doing?!”

Does Arkana not realize that satellites are a thing? Charis thinks. Unless—

Well. *Unless* it has gotten rid of them. Arkana is *massive,* surrounded by plasma shields that vaporize anything they touch on contact, and has been orbiting the Earth for over a thousand years. For all anyone knows, the ship has been clearing its field of orbit like a giant robotic vacuum cleaner that entire time. And anything outside its range, it has probably figured out how to turn off.

And how unlikely *is* all that, really? Considering Charis lived on Arkana through his early childhood and still has to go up for work more than he cares to, and this is *still* the first he's learning of this, the implications are not hard to follow. If it *was* in fact Arkana that terraformed most of the water off the Earth's surface—well. Blocking off the sky, both literally and technologically, so that Sacrosancts never learn the extent of what Arkana is doing to keep them alive is small change in comparison.

"How long have you known?" Charis asks.

Charis's voice is small. He doesn't want to admit how much this scares him. And Kat seems to know this, because he drops back down onto his side, sliding one arm behind Charis's neck and the other over his middle, encouraging Charis to curl into him again.

After a few beats, Charis does. He tucks his head under Kat's like a child as Kat strokes his hair.

Kat's hand in his hair is soothing, despite the way this revelation is making Charis feel a bone-deep kind of hopelessness. "Not long. Since I last spoke with my father," Kat answers. "And I'm still not sure. My father knows something that he isn't saying."

That's hardly unusual, from what little Charis knows of Aravan.

"Like what happens after Arkana runs out of resources?"

Kat nods again. He doesn't say anything right away, though. Instead, a few minutes pass in silence between them, and Charis starts to feel sleepiness close in on him.

"But my father wouldn't have had all of us put in the citizen bank if he weren't at the limit of what he knows," Kat eventually confesses.

Wait.

"All of us—you mean you and your brothers? Is that why we didn't need Eris's program for the pod—?"

Kat shakes his head. Takes another breath, almost like he's steeling himself for something.

"Kat," Charis prompts.

There's a long beat.

"Not just Ariel, Rafel and me, Angel. All of us." Kat's hand stills, but he doesn't remove it. "You and Karra, too."

What.

"But that—"

"Angel. *I didn't know.*"

There's noise in Charis's head, now. So much noise, like the sound of rushing water and collapsing buildings and explosions

and the deafening frequency of the sound grenade. And there's a claw closing in around him, one that cuts through the skin and wire and bones inside him until he's shaking in Kat's arms, clutching at Kat's bare chest, and trying to remember how to breathe.

"Why does he want to talk to *me,* though? What do I have that he can use?!"

Charis's voice is weak, now. Kat folds his hand around the back of Charis's head.

"Angel, I really don't know. All he said was that he's protecting the family."

"Does he want me to tell everyone the truth?!"

Charis hears his tears before he feels them. They're in his voice. Kat holds him, pressing his lips to Charis's hair.

Is the mainframe going to sic its Sacrosanct on everyone else if that's what it decides is necessary to protect them? It's an insane thought, one that seems so contrary to everything he has ever known about the mainframe's relationship with humanity that Charis almost can't process it. The people would never go along with it, and there's no way the mainframe is capable of as much mind control as it would require to send a couple million Sacrosanct to Earth to kill off the only remaining competition for its resources—

"*Semara keban magaling sero vignis, id ishanaset makorn sero mestum,*" Charis says, reciting the Arkanene oath of allegiance that all Sacrosanct children are taught from the time they can

form complete sentences. *I will always live in harmony, for the good of the body to whom I belong.* "What a fucking *lie.*"

Charis can feel his tears now. He can feel where they're collecting on Kat's arm under his temple and over his own cheek as Kat gathers them with his thumb and wipes them away.

"It's a lie, Kat. *Everything* I've ever known is a lie."

They stay like that for a long time. Long enough that the moon sets, taking the pale light with it until the first golden threads of dawn appear on the horizon. By then, Charis's tears have run out and Kat has fallen asleep beside Charis, still holding him close.

Charis knows what they have to do, though. He knows it, and apparently so does Aravan: if they don't want to find out what will happen to the Earth once the mainframe loses its purpose, then they have to turn off the prime directive before its course is irreversible.

In other words, it's time to change G.O.D.'s mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kat awakes the next morning in Charis's bed, alone.

He sits up, running a hand over his eyes. Daylight is almost offensively bright through the windows amidst all the white. The temptation to just fall back down onto Charis's incredible bed with an arm over his face and tell the world to fuck off is strong, so for a few seconds, he does.

The first real thing Kat does after that is to scan his body. He's a little sore after the previous day's events, both the good and the unfortunate, but not nearly as much as he should be. Not nearly as much as he would have been only a few days ago.

Over the side of the bed, his and Charis's discarded clothing is still where they'd thrown it, a concrete reminder of what they'd done. Despite his uneasiness about Charis not being there, the sight sends a warm, pleased flush through Kat as he remembers what Charis had looked and felt like under him, how easily he'd come apart and how beautiful he looked when he did. And the memory registers in Kat's groin as much as his mind, which is how Kat knows he needs to get out of bed lest he lose himself to a bit more than the memory.

They hadn't really cleaned themselves up after. They probably should have. Kat certainly feels like he needs it, and when he glances at the bathroom, he wonders if Charis would mind if he used his shower.

Showers are a luxury they don't have at the compound. Water is too scarce, so they use sonic showers that are designed to function without it. He's had more opportunities than most

Insignis to see how the 1% lives—since his uncle is Sacrosanct, that side of the family has a house in the Vizor—but even so, Kat can count on one hand the number of times he has ever been there.

That passing impulse is quickly drowned out when Kat notices how silent the house is. His own clothes are not an option right now, so as he gets out of bed, rolling out what stiffness *does* remain in his muscles, he makes for Charis's closet.

What he finds there is a little surreal. He knows, in his head, that Charis is a celebrity. Until a few weeks ago, that's how Kat himself had known him. But now that he has the *real* Charis, the two of them almost feel like different people.

That dichotomy is less true when Kat opens Charis's closet to find nearly two thirds of it taken up by the sort of clothing he wears on Arkana. Or at work, generally. As Kat walks in, picking through a few things on the racks, he even recognizes a few things he has seen Charis wear before—in passing, mostly—on talk shows or music videos or ads he's seen around the city. A surprising number of them are things he really wouldn't mind seeing Charis wear again. For him, specifically, without anything else on.

His more normal clothes are at the back. Kat grabs a pair of cargo pants that seem like one of many others like them along with an opaque, long-sleeved shirt that will cover his scars and tattoo, then gets dressed and heads back out into the hall.

Kat had been hoping the silence was just momentary. It isn't, though. There's very obviously no one else in the house. Nonetheless, Kat calls out for Charis as he walks downstairs.

“Charis?” A few beats of silence. He tries again. “Angel, are you here?”

Silence.

As soon as Kat’s foot hits the landing at the base of the stairs, Kat knows something is off. He hears the kitchen activate—a machine tucked into the corner makes a series of noises, and a few beats later something dark and bitter-smelling starts streaming into a clear mug.

Kat’s monitor also alerts him. There’s a banner message across it.

AS THE WORLD SHOULD END,

I CLOSE MY EYES TO DECAY.

TO LIFE, WE ASCEND

PARADISE BECKONS ME!

For a moment, Kat just looks at it, the looping script of the message unfamiliar until he realizes where he’s seen it before. It’s written in a language long dead—there are books in his father’s study that are written in it, books Kat hasn’t tried to read since long before he got his monitor.

Except that what he’s reading makes no sense. Most messages like this from the mainframe have a purpose, like the arrest log notifications—but this one reads almost like a song lyric or a

line from a poem. Kat snaps a picture with his eyes and taps on the banner, which immediately dismisses it.

He fires off a message to Charis.

—Angel, where are you?

The thing in the corner has stopped dispensing…whatever it was dispensing, so Kat goes over to it and picks up the mug, smelling it before tasting it.

It's not bad. Whatever it is, it's greenish and herbal-smelling, and very bitter, but not unpleasant. Kat has a bit more and leans against the counter, waiting for Charis to respond.

Except when he looks at his monitor, there's an error message.

—404. NOT FOUND

Kat takes another sip of whatever that stuff is before setting the mug on the counter behind him. He dismisses the error and tries again.

Same thing.

All at once, it seems, the uneasiness that he's been feeling since he woke up becomes real. *Something* isn't right. He fires off a message to Karra.

—When was the last time you talked to Chay?

There's no response, not right away. He doesn't get the error message, though, so he grabs the mug again and finishes off about half of whatever the kitchen made for him as he studies the sunlit desert sand out the living room windows and tries to

get a handle on his growing panic. A couple minutes later, Karra writes back.

—yesterday. before he went to the studio

—I messaged him while we were on the transport but he was already asleep

Right. Karra *had* been on the transport yesterday after they'd been rescued. In the rush of everything, Kat hadn't even fully registered his presence.

—I thought he was with you

—?

Kat takes a breath, mulling over the next detail. Even though Karra has absolutely *no* leg to stand on, Kat knows Karra might skin him alive for having slept with Charis last night, and he will be able to correctly infer that fact from almost nothing. He and Charis have that in common.

But the problem of Charis being missing is a *much* bigger concern. Kat answers honestly.

—He was. He woke up before me and was gone by the time I woke up.

Karra's response is much faster this time, and Kat is a bit relieved despite the circumstances when he sees it.

—I'll try. Hang on

Then, a few beats later:

—wtf it threw a 404

—did it do that to you??

The blooming sense of dread in Kat's stomach latches on and *tugs.*

—Yes.

—Did you get this message on your monitor when you woke up this morning?

Kat sends Karra the photo he took of the message. Again, Karra's response is nearly instantaneous.

—no

—I've never seen anything like that before

—what language is that?

This takes Kat aback for a moment. There's so much information both *in* dead languages and *about* dead languages on the mainframe—why wouldn't Karra already know it?

The mainframe is a facilitator of knowledge, not a replacement for memory. In order to know something, that something must still be learned, practiced, and cultivated.

That makes sense, Kat supposes, but it still doesn't explain what's going on. Kat answers Karra anyway.

—I don't know the name of it. It's from the old world. Long dead.

Karra's response confirms his suspicion.

—wait how do you know that??

—actually why am I surprised

Despite his growing panic, this makes Kat smile. Karra is still writing, though.

—if I didn't get it maybe it went to my sim

That would explain it. And if it went to Karra's sim, which is connected to the mainframe, that means it originated in some way *from* the mainframe.

—See if you can check. Some sims are black boxes but yours might not be.

—I'm going to check a couple of other places, but I'll keep you posted.

Karra responds with a thumbs-up react, then the line goes quiet.

Charis isn't anywhere in the house. Kat searches every room, including the ground-level garage—which is empty but for a sleek ground transport—and a couple rooms upstairs that were locked, more for thoroughness than because he thought Charis would be there. He even goes so far as to infrared scan the whole house.

Nothing.

He tries the hangar. It takes him a second to pull up the memory of Charis opening the door, trying to recall how he'd done it. He recalls Charis having entered a code on his monitor, but he has no active memory of what that code was, though he'd been watching Charis as he'd entered it.

It's possible his eyes may have stored it subconsciously, Kat thinks. And no sooner than he has that thought, the memory appears to zoom in on Charis's monitor—pixelated now, due to Kat's poor line of sight at the time, but clear enough that Kat can discern the code. Barely.

He plugs it into his monitor. The door opens.

Kat is fully in his memory now as he follows the stone stairs, replicating the various things Charis had done as they'd left the hangar before their mission to the fence: re-locking the hangar door from inside, activating the lights as he descends, wheeling open the huge metal doors at the base of the stairs. Without Charis here, Kat's footsteps across the wide hangar floor sound like gunshots on the concrete.

"Chay?" Kat calls, though he knows Charis isn't here.

Kat stops in the middle of the floor, taking a mental inventory of all the transports to see if any are missing. The cloaked transport is still where Kat had parked it when he'd brought Charis home last night, still in the middle of the landing pad.

But Charis's transport is gone. This time, when Kat climbs into the pilot's seat, his heart barely even skips at all.

Kat fires up the ignition and hits the command to retract the door in the ceiling, entering the cloaking sequence. Amidst all the chaos of yesterday, the only thing that had been on Kat's mind was protecting Charis. Get him out, get him home.

The close call had *almost* been enough to make Kat forget about the Obedience Protocol the Arkanene soldier had entered on Charis's monitor.

But Kat had looked it up. Of course he had. While Charis slept, he'd spent several hours digging through both the mainframe *and* the off-system for anything he could find about Obedience Protocols and had turned up absolutely nothing. In fact, every system he searched was so scrubbed clean of any trace of anything even *resembling* what Kat was rapidly beginning to suspect the Protocol *truly* entails that Kat is growing more and more certain that he'd been right.

So, with baited breath, Kat opens Arkana's entry logs.

The first time Kat had found the entry logs, when he'd been rigged to the system Eris uses to access various information networks that are beyond what the tech at the compound can reach without assistance, he'd been almost positive either he or Eris had accidentally hacked into something. But no, there they were: every arrival and departure, listed chronologically by time, entry gate, and the name of person coming or going.

At the time, it had been somewhat shocking how few of them there were. Charis really hadn't been kidding when he'd said that most Sacrosancts don't leave Arkana. The way Kat had reasoned it out, though, the logs are a security measure: no one could come or go from Arkana without the mainframe knowing about it, and the mainframe makes that knowledge accessible to anyone with a monitor who wants it. Instant accountability.

This time is different, though. This time Kat opens Arkana's entry logs to see hundreds, perhaps thousands of entries across dozens of gates, including some that, according to his monitor, are not often used for off-world entry or exit. Even weirder,

they're all spaced in intervals of four minutes. There are so many of them that after a few seconds of scrolling, Kat pulls open the search bar and types Charis's name.

Velcharis Lyricus Mensara

Charis is there. He'd docked two hours ago in an off-world agency transport. Kat swears under his breath. And as the cloaking sequence loads, Kat steers under the door, hits the thrusters, and is past the Vizor's airspace security within the span of a heartbeat.

The compound is not especially close to the city. It takes Kat over an hour to get there in his crawler. And even though his family's cloaked transport isn't as fast as Charis's, it still all but *swallows* the ground beneath it. Within what feels like less than five minutes, he's radioing for someone to open the hangar door and is out of the transport before the engines are fully off, making immediately for Eris.

What he finds when he gets to the control room is only marginally less frantic than the rapidly escalating panic in Kat's brain. Karra and Faramorn are at the outskirts of a circle of guards collected around the end of one of the couches at the side of the room, all looking at the same holoscreen. Karra looks like he's about half a second away from bolting for the family off-worlder despite what are almost certainly Faramorn's orders not to do anything rash.

Even his father is there. He and Rafel are talking on the other side of the room. His father is the first one to see him, and he nods minutely at Kat—which is enough to have Rafel turn back as well, though Kat ignores him, making instead for Karra.

“The problem is that they’re a hive brain right now, and we don’t definitively know that Charis isn’t a part of it. If he is and we just yank him out of it, it might scramble his memory.”

Eris. Not surprising. But the relief that the guards have figured out far more than Kat currently knows about what’s going on is quickly drowned out by the look of terror on Karra’s face.

Kat looks at Faramorn, who acknowledges him.

“You’re aware of what an Obedience Protocol is? What it does?”

Kat shakes his head. He half expects Faramorn to judge him for not already knowing, and it’s almost a surprise when he doesn’t.

“An Obedience Protocol prevents its subject from being able to refuse any order from the mainframe until it expires,” comes his father’s voice.

Aravan has joined them. Rafel is standing behind him, his eyes fixed on Karra, and the first thing Kat thinks is that it’s *very* strange to see Rafel in anything other than the captain’s chair. Aravan is so rarely directly involved with the family’s day-to-day activity that Kat regularly forgets that Rafel has not actually taken their father’s place yet as head of the family.

“So what do we *do* about it? We can’t just leave him there, I will fucking *get him myself—*”

“Yeah, but you can’t just *go,*” Leon says. He’s sitting on the couch, and it’s his holoscreen everyone is gathered around, but he’s twisted himself around so he can look at Karra.

Rafel makes immediately for Karra, reaching for his hand, and Karra doesn’t let him have it. Instead, Kat feels the moment he and Karra both turn to Rafel, their eyes full of defiance and resolve.

“Okay, never do that again. That is too weird,” Rafel says. He looks at Kat as he answers. “First of all, since we don’t know whether the mainframe is getting people through the blood or through monitors, you need to wait until Eris or Leon install the hard loops in *yours* to redirect any inquiries from the mainframe.”

Kat’s head snaps over to his cousin, who flinches a bit and holds up a hand. “Dude. Kat. He’s been my best friend since we were ten, I’m freaking the fuck out too. We all are.”

Kat ignores his cousin in favor of his brother.

“Why.”

His question comes out a statement. Rafel’s eyes are surprisingly full of sympathy as he answers. “If anyone rigged to a sim goes up, basically what will happen is they’ll be a copy of themselves. The mainframe will register their presence and possibly try to kill them, because it will think they stole their own identity.”

Suddenly there’s a hand on Kat’s bicep, and Kat about jumps around to see Vyk standing behind him. Kat hadn’t even heard her approach.

At the look of apology in Vyk's eyes, it doesn't take Kat long to piece together what's going on, at least part of it. This situation has evolved too quickly for the family to prepare. Guard clearance takes a long time to get, and anyone who isn't Sacrosanct has to have a good reason to be on Arkana. And because they don't have guard clearance, and there's no time to get it, the only people who can go up are people with real monitors.

That leaves five people, aside from himself, who even have the ability to get into Arkana at all: Karra, Leon, Yen, his uncle Vash, and his father.

It can't possibly be that simple. And it isn't, Kat already knows. Karra had not gotten the message from the mainframe this morning, and it's easy enough to infer from that that neither had Yen or Leon.

That leaves himself, his father, and his uncle.

"So *what* then? Who is going?" Karra nearly shouts.

Aravan can't go even if this *were* the kind of mission he'd actually participate in himself. And it's a moot point anyway, because his father's blood signal is inert, and if *Aravan* goes up—someone the mainframe thinks is dead—Kat doesn't even know what the consequences could be.

"I am," Kat says under his breath. "I'm going."

He feels his father look at him. "Yes, you are. Eris, I trust the hard loop is prepared," his father says. Eris nods. "Good. Make six copies and be back within the hour."

In less than a blink, Eris gets up from the couch where she'd been sitting beside Leon. Mako immediately takes her place, scrolling through something on Leon's holoscreen that Kat can't see from here.

For a long moment, Kat just looks at his father. Aravan isn't looking at him, though. He's looking at Karra with a rare visible emotion, his disapproval clear on his face.

"I'm going. I don't care what anyone says. He's my *brother,* I'm not leaving him up there—"

Kat would be the first one to admit he has never fully seen eye to eye with Karra. Karra has always openly detested certain sides of the family business, though he puts up with them as much for Rafel as the fact he has been able to figure out how to keep himself apart from them. On this, though, they're absolutely in sync, and when Karra finally looks at Kat after Kat has been boring a hole into his temple with his eyes for at least a couple of minutes, Kat knows Karra understands him.

Because he wants to go *now.* The longer they wait, the harder Charis will be to find. There's no way to know from here whether Charis has been sucked into the hive brain, and whether he has or hasn't—he's already got proof that the mainframe can and will hide Charis from him. He'd snapped a picture of the 404 error too.

"Michal, you need to think things through," his father says.

Of *course* his father knows he's as close as Karra to bolting for the family off-worlder. Kat has never been able to hide from Aravan.

"What else do we need?!" Karra snaps back, even though Aravan isn't talking to him.

Kat hears the unspoken undertone. His father should not have to be having this conversation with him. Kat is the heir to Aravan's mind, after all, if not his empire, and Kat does *not* have patience for his father's games right now. A hot flash of rage rips through Kat and he whirls on his father, already snarling at him in Arkane.

"De bahoum ik varai obistvayou—"

"Do not threaten me, son," his father interrupts.

Aravan's eyes are as black as the smoke. Kat meets them, and when he does, the first true fear he has felt all day pours through his body like liquid nitrogen, freezing him instantly down to the bone. Because for all that his father's displays of emotion are rarer even than sightings of his monitor, never, not a single time in Kat's active memory has he *ever* seen his father afraid.

This—whatever this is, it's far bigger than Kat knows. Far bigger than he has time to fully understand right now. And for once, his unspoken inquiries to the mainframe are going unanswered.

They're *all* in the dark.

"Ya shul," Kat acknowledges under his breath.

Silence falls around the control room. "Someone explain to me why Yen isn't going, then, if Karra is," Kat says after a few beats.

“I am,” Yen says from the doorway to the room Eris had disappeared into.

Kat turns. Yen’s entire left arm is encased in a thick black sleeve with some kind of box on the outside that has a lot of wires coming out of it, secured to his chest by a strap across his shoulders. It reminds Kat vaguely of the remote access rig Eris had hooked him up to, and it looks extremely uncomfortable.

“What is that,” Kat says.

Again, the question comes out a statement. Yen smiles, though it looks a little like he’s in pain.

“My sim is compromised. This is fixing it.”

“Why is your sim compromised?”

“Because of the enforcement job,” Yen answers. “The mainframe thought I was there with Tauran to get Charis.”

“And the mainframe does *not* like being lied to,” Leon supplies. He’s turned forward again, back to the holoscreen above his left arm.

There’s a lot here, and Kat can all but feel his brain blowing smoke trying to piece it together. This one, he can’t quite manage, so he directs his line of reasoning at Yen.

“Your sim is an engineer on Arkana,” he says.

Yen nods once. This time his smile is more like the smirk Kat is familiar with. “A military engineer. How do you think we were able to find Charis so fast after Tauran took him? My sim has top secret security clearance.”

Okay, what the fuck.

“Why does no one *tell* me anything—”

It’s his father who answers, and if Kat isn’t hallucinating, there’s actually a hint of pride on his face. Somehow that’s even more unsettling.

“There is usually no need. You figure it out yourself.”

Kat frowns at this, trying to fill the remaining holes in his reasoning. When the first one clicks, Kat feels a wave of shame at not even considering—

“Vash is missing too, isn’t he,” Kat says.

And Vash would be the bigger priority to his father. Not because of their relationship, but because unlike Charis, Vash is a true Sacrosanct, one with the blood, who is still connected to the mainframe—meaning the mainframe already reads him. And Vash is full of a lot more family secrets than Charis is.

Even though he hasn’t checked yet, Kat already knows his uncle is somewhere in the extensive list of arrivals, a fact his monitor supplies when it *does* deign to talk to him again.

07:56, Pegasus Gate: Aurivash Scorpianus Oriavan

At Kat’s question, Yen nods. “While you and Karra find Charis, I’m going to get my father.”

“And Leon?”

“Benched,” Leon says. “Someone with a connected monitor needs to stay.”

That doesn’t make any sense, Kat immediately thinks. Leon’s monitor *isn’t* connected. That was the entire reason the mission to Arkana to get *Kat’s* monitor had gone sideways at the last second—because the disconnection sequence on his sim tripped early.

“Leon will be connecting through me,” Aravan says, still looking at Kat.

Wait.

Wait.

Aside from Kat, his father is the only one in the room who is still connected to the mainframe. He and Leon are the only ones staying. Leon does *not* have mainframe access, but according to the mainframe, Leon is alive.

When what they’re planning to do finally clicks, Kat very nearly shouts.

“You’re *rigging to Leon?!*”

The room falls silent again. It seems like no one even breathes. It’s Rafel who finally breaks the silence.

“*Everyone* with a monitor is involved. Everyone is at risk. We don’t know what the hive will do, so once the three of you leave, the rest of us are preparing for war.”

“Will it even *work*—?!”

“We don’t know,” Leon says without turning around. “Fuck around and find out, I guess.”

And isn’t *that* the sentiment of the day. An hour later, Kat, Karra, and Yen are loading into the family off-worlder. Yen’s left arm has been freed from whatever that sleeve was, though the entire arm is extremely red, and parts look like they’ve only recently stopped bleeding.

Part of Kat wants to ask what that device was, but before he can get the words out, the fact Charis is missing and Kat’s resulting panic about it reinstate themselves in Kat’s brain and body with fervor, and the ignition sequence is taking a year. His hands are white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He’s not entirely sure he’s breathing.

Ten minutes ago, Eris had stuck a wide needle into the left side of Kat’s monitor, one equipped with a simultaneously physical and digital protocol designed to block any and all inquiries from the mainframe, no matter where they may be directed. Kat had felt neither the needle nor the virus, though his arm is starting to itch a bit near the injection site.

“We’re flying directly into Central Command. Ophiuchus West,” Yen says.

“The blackout district?”

Karra has turned around in the co-pilot’s chair and is looking back at Yen, who is sprawled out over the entire back end of the U-shaped ring of seats in the off-worlder like they aren’t about to fly into space. He isn’t even strapped in yet.

“Yeah. It’s technically one of the military hangars, but they’re repurposing it for the Collection.”

The Collection. Yen said that word with a capital in the title. For what feels like the thousandth time in the past few hours, dread crawls through Kat, all the more when his monitor once again does not supply the answers he’s looking for.

When Kat glances back at Yen in the rearview, Yen has a calf propped up across one of his knees and is scrolling through a holoscreen suspended above his face.

“Ignition’s loaded, strap in,” Kat warns.

Yen waves a hand. “It’s fine. Just go.”

Kat rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t argue. The hangar door opens and Kat hits the ground thrusters, waiting for the transport’s suspension pegs to retract, then navigates it carefully up the slope.

He glances back at Yen again. Yen has a belt strapped diagonally across his waist now, which is almost worse than not wearing one at all, but his cousin is also a grown ass adult.

As soon as they’re clear of the compound’s airspace, Kat locks onto Arkana’s current location along its orbital path and guns the thrusters so hard he leaves an audible *boom* in their wake. He hears Yen huff and swear.

“Fuck. Ow.”

“I told you to strap in.”

Kat can almost hear Yen's eye roll. Karra has turned around again. "What are you doing?"

"Checking my logs," Yen answers. "I haven't been able to before now because my sim is basically a black box to reduce the error potential of the sim's AI."

Kat glances in the rearview again as they continue to gain altitude. "Then how did you find Charis with it when he was taken?"

"I didn't use the sim. I piggybacked off its security clearance, not unlike what we're currently doing."

There's more to this, but Kat's head is still so full of static that he doesn't have the spare bandwidth to ask.

"What the *fuck,*" Karra says.

Kat glances at Karra. Karra doesn't seem to be talking about Yen's sim mechanics—in fact, he's half out of his seat, about as close to the cockpit window as he can get without fully unstrapping.

"*What* is that. Is that the smoke?!"

"Where," Kat asks immediately.

Karra points. Kat follows the gesture, considering. They're gaining altitude so fast they're already halfway through the stratosphere, they don't really have time to spare, and the *get Chay where is he we need to find him don't let it be too late* that's a constant ticker tape of panic is screaming at him that this is not as important.

But the small part of his rational brain that *is* still online is the same part that has been studying the smoke for months. It's also the part that knows full well that whatever is happening right now might not still be happening when they come back. If something weird is going on with the smoke and the mainframe is keeping things from him, then he needs to know.

Kat steers the transport's nose back down until they're no longer gaining altitude, but aren't losing it either.

"Take a picture."

"I have been," Karra answers. He hits *project* on his monitor and the image appears on a holoscreen suspended between them.

For a beat or two longer than is really safe, Kat just stares at the image, not entirely able to believe what he's seeing. It clearly *is* the smoke—it's the same spot where it always emerges, they're just way higher up above it right now.

Far from the anemic trickles of smoke that have been popping up lately, the image Velkarra has captured shows an aerial view of massive plumes of black smoke coming up from the gorge, so thick and dark it swallows half the dome-like mountainsides surrounding it.

"That should be a *tower* of smoke. What's happening to it?" Velkarra asks.

After a beat, Kat starts to descend.

Like the cloaked transport he and Charis had taken out here the other day, the family off-worlder is treated in a way that allows

it to repel plasma fire. Nothing unsanctioned can get through off world-grade plasma shields, though, and Kat stops accelerating well before they reach the one over the gorge.

Because they can see it, now. The reason the smoke isn't a column that stretches into space is because it's collecting under the plasma shield, where it is instantly vaporized.

"So that's why you can't see it from the city," Yen says.

Yen is up out of his seat, now, one elbow braced on both Kat's and Karra's chairs.

They're out of range of the shield, and Kat starts to make a circle around it. "Karra, start filming, I want a record of this. Yen, can lidar get through that shield?"

Karra nods, unstrapping fully so he can stand by the window. Kat sees Yen looking at him in the rearview.

"I don't know. Worth a shot. You need to get closer, though."

Kat nods, and Yen leans against the bottom of the dash on his right arm, his gaze fixed ahead until they're close enough that he can start to scan.

The way Yen is standing, his left arm is right by Kat. Kat snaps a picture to study later, when he isn't piloting a multimillion-credit off-worlder around one of the strongest plasma shields that exists. Kat *can* talk and fly at the same time, though.

"What did that thing do to your arm?"

Yen is standing stock still as he scans. Apparently lidar *can* get through a plasma shield, because there's a little holoscreen in

front of Yen's right eye that has a point cloud on it, though Kat can't tell at a glance if it's generating anything useful.

Roughly a minute goes by before Yen answers, and Kat counts the seconds.

"It's not what it did to my arm. It's what it did to my sim." Yen collapses the little screen back into his eye and turns so his back is to the dash, blinking his eyes back to normal. "I told you my sim is compromised. So we partitioned it."

"We?" Kat asks.

"What does *that* mean?" Karra asks, though he's still filming, his back to both Kat and Yen. Yen glances at him anyway.

"Eris and Leon wrote a program together that will continue to simulate my sim's military duties based on its own previous activity. We don't know how long it will work—it could be anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. The only thing I still have is a replica of my security clearance."

This makes no sense. Kat feels his brows cross, repeating his earlier question.

"So what did that thing do to your arm?"

Yen turns toward Kat. "It needed updated biometric data. The fastest way to get it was to collect it in real time."

Immediately, a full-body shiver washes over Kat, starting from his own left forearm.

He knows what this means, though the reasoning is also clearly from the mainframe's style of thinking rather than his own. And

what Yen is saying is this: in much the same way as Eris had injected the hard loop virus into their arms, the sleeve Yen had been wearing had linked directly with his monitor through its own synthetic nervous system.

Without nerve gas.

Yen is in a lot more pain than he's letting on, Kat thinks. All of a sudden, the level of respect he has for his cousin ratchets up several notches. It's also a good stand-in for Kat's still-outstanding desire to murder Yen for using Charis as bait.

Kat glances at Yen again, briefly meeting his eyes. "Will it work?"

Yen's responding smile is a little pinched. "Who knows. There's no precedent for anything we're doing right now. But we also don't have a choice."

With that, Yen makes for the back of the transport again. This time he does strap in, though even just a glance in the rearview is enough to tell Kat he isn't wearing the top half of the seatbelt.

Karra sits back down too, winding the zoom back down on his eyes and blinking back to normal.

"This is so fucked up."

Once again, Kat and Karra are in agreement.

With a final check of Arkana's current location, Kat steers up again as the off-worlder starts to regain altitude. Within a few minutes, they're through the exosphere, and Kat swiftly and

smoothly engages the off-world thrusters and steers into space once the craft runs out of air for its engines.

The process of docking on Arkana is not simple. The ship orbits the Earth at nearly 30,000 kilometers per hour, far too fast to catch without exhausting the transport's fuel supply. The way to dock with Arkana is actually to let Arkana catch you: to station your craft in front of it in its field of orbit and wait for the shield to admit you, thereby drawing your craft into its artificial gravity so you can safely dock at its gates without being flung out the other side of the shield. If you're lucky, the process takes a few minutes; if you're unlucky, it can take hours, even days.

Their luck is middling this time. Between the off-worlder's carefully-calculated phasing burns—short thrusts from the engines to keep the transport in the correct orbit—and the signal from the mainframe about where and when the shields will be opened for them, the approach takes about an hour.

Watching the massive spinning wheel of Arkana getting closer and closer is no less eerie this time than it was the first time. The shield opens without incident, though, and Kat steers through the gap just before it closes behind them, following the directions the mainframe is feeding to the craft's dash about where to dock.

"Oh shit," Yen says.

Kat glances in the rearview, which is as much of a look as he can spare while conducting proximity operations with the continent of a spaceship in front of them. Yen is sitting up in his seat, now, holoscreen once again in front of him.

“What?” Kat asks anyway.

Yen is out of his seat again before he answers, making for Karra. He holds his holoscreen between them.

“Oh *fuck,*” Karra echoes. Kat hears Karra snatch the screen out of the air and bring it in front of him. “Is this for real? The mainframe knows about the compound?!”

“It doesn’t just know,” Yen answers, his voice low. “It has always known. The compound has never been hidden. The mainframe has just never seen a need to intervene because there weren’t any Sacrosancts in danger until Charis got involved.”

“Hang on,” Kat interjects.

Yen leaves the screen with Karra and turns to Kat.

“Because of Charis’s high profile, bringing him into the fold of our family set off a chain reaction. The military showing up last night? I already told you, that wasn’t to get Tauran. That was to get *Chay.*”

The dread that has been making Kat’s blood run cold since before he’d left for the compound this morning reaches absolute zero.

“*What?* No. No, why would it want him? Chay has never done anything wrong, ever. Everyone loves him—”

Kat interrupts Karra mid-stream.

“Yes, he has,” Kat confesses.

Yes, he has. And it's Kat's fault.

All of a sudden, Kat feels sick as the implications of this spool out in his mind, along with his father's words during their chess match: *Arkana is technologically capable of reading you, but its programming won't allow it.*

Unless it does.

Unless it reads you as a threat.

And of *course* Arkana would read Charis as a threat, Kat thinks. The artist known as Velashay is one of the biggest celebrities on both worlds, and Charis has the ability to influence a *lot* of people to rebel should he ever want to. And over the course of the last few weeks—especially the last few days—Kat has *personally escorted* Charis along a veritable speed run of criminal activity, criminal activity specifically oriented toward uncovering a secret so massive that Arkana would destroy its own charges to keep it from getting out.

Which means Arkana is reading him, too. Or it was, until Eris introduced the hard loop virus. The mainframe has known his thoughts, his location, his involvement with Charis—*everything.*

Nothing is merely possible when everything is given.

Kat runs a hand over his face, his stomach clenching as he fights to keep control over the tidal wave of guilt that's threatening to overtake him. He's in the middle of proximity operations—artificial gravity or not, there's nothing stopping them from crashing into Arkana if Kat loses focus.

Yen lays a hand on his shoulder.

“It would have happened eventually, between Karra and Leon. If anything, my brother is way more at fault than you are. They’ve been friends for a decade.”

Karra sighs audibly, clearly frustrated about something. Kat glances at him as they steer past a skybridge—his feet are up on the seat, his arms around his knees. Karra is a year older than him, but in this moment, he looks strikingly young. “It doesn’t make sense. Why does the mainframe care *now*? They’ve been getting into trouble for years, but—”

Karra cuts himself off. Yen looks at him, finishing his sentence.

“Just nothing the mainframe read as a threat to the prime directive,” Yen adds.

That’s true, Kat supposes. Charis wouldn’t have been anywhere near the Boneyard that fateful day if he didn’t have at least something of an appetite for danger. Before he’d gotten involved with his *family,* though, not just his cousin, the more likely result of Charis getting into trouble in the Boneyard would have been *Arkana* getting him out. Kat had known that from the beginning—it was why he’d called Yen in the first place.

“*Rayel machum samshana walo keban lohat samrasreshad,*” Kat mutters in Arkane.

Kat hears Karra turn to him.

“Come again?!”

Kat's voice is barely audible even to himself, but everyone in this transport right now has enhanced senses. "The first thing the mainframe ever said to me. *Nothing is merely possible when everything is given.*"

"But that's not what that says?" Karra protests.

"If it was 'given,' it would be *samdavad,*" Yen clarifies.

"What's the difference?" Kat asks.

It comes out a statement. Kat was raised bilingually fluent in Arkane, so that he's apparently missed some kind of subtlety here is news to him. Yen puts him out of his misery.

"*Rasreshas* is 'to allow.' *Davas* is 'to give.' The mainframe wasn't lying to you, it was telling you to stay on its good side."

The cockpit falls silent as the dash lights up with an indication that Ophiuchus West Gate is ready to receive them. Yen takes a seat and straps in, though not before putting on his uniform jacket, which draws a long hiss of pain out of him when he has to slide his left hand through.

Kat and Karra get a notification from Eris at the same time.

—Avoid detection for as long as possible. Remember the hive brain. Arkanenes will be looking for signs of deviance.

Then she tells them how to disconnect Charis.

"You have the hard loop for Chay?" Yen asks Karra as he arranges his uniform to compliance.

"Yep," Karra answers.

“And you know what to do with it?”

“Disconnect, then inject,” Karra recites.

Injecting Charis with the hard loop virus while he’s still connected could have disastrous consequences, and none of them have any idea what they would be. Once again, they’re flying blind.

Kat pulls up to the gate and stops as the pneumatic lock fastens around the transport door. Yen unstraps and grabs his kit, then makes for the door as soon as the skybridge meets the transport’s hull.

White camouflage is a strange concept, Kat thinks.

“Wait until the last possible moment to trip the hive. And don’t wait for me, my father and I will be taking his transport down.”

Yen looks at Kat and Karra expectantly. Karra salutes, his voice thick with irony.

“Yes, sir.”

“*Lo mayirsam,*” Yen says, then opens the door.

No mourners.

It’s time to go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Charis had left his house that morning, he'd been on a mission. If they were going to change the prime directive, to manipulate G.O.D., then Charis needed advice. So, as the pale dawn light began to wash over the desert sand, Charis had taken a breath, exhaled slowly, and climbed out of bed, making straight for the most manipulative person he knew.

Kat had all but chained himself to Charis while they'd slept. Or, rather, while *Kat* had slept—Charis hadn't gotten a wink, not with the knowledge that the world was ending buzzing around in his brain. One of many nice things about being Sacrosanct, though, is that skin monitors store more energy than their human hosts require on any given day. So while the lingering aftereffects of the drug were, and still are, making Charis feel a little bit like his limbs and head are full of sludge, he isn't truly tired, and he'd been able to slide out from Kat's hold in a complicated maneuver that had involved freeing his legs first, then sliding down through his arms, quickly turning his pillow sideways so Kat's arms closed around it as Charis finally slid free.

Once he'd managed to extract himself, Charis had stood there for a second, looking at the picture that was a naked Kat in his bed, letting the sight of him slowly banish the deep dread otherwise threatening to paralyze Charis as he'd contemplated what he was about to do. Kat's arm was thrown over the pillow, the sheets about halfway down his back—most of Kat's crow-and-eye tattoo was visible, along with the scars on his back.

Kat is a heavier sleeper than Charis had expected, and it had been very, *very* tempting to sneak back up on Kat, pull the sheets further down his back, and distract himself by tracing the lines of Kat's scars and tattoo with his fingers, or possibly his tongue, until Kat woke up. But that would completely undermine the reason Charis had snuck away in the first place, so—taking a page from Kat's book—Charis had snapped a picture of Kat in his bed with his eyes for later, steeled himself as much as he could, then turned and made for his closet before he lost his resolve.

He'd tiptoed across the floor, keeping the lights in his closet off as he quickly found the various pieces of the outfit he had in mind: tight, but stretchy white jeans with lace panels in the sides and a flowy, slightly iridescent blouse whose neckline cuts far enough down to expose the three bars on his chest. Aside from that, he'd kept his accessories minimal. He can compensate with makeup when he gets up to Arkana, and he needs to be dressed for an escape. So, after grabbing a pair of combat boots from his closet by their boot shafts so they wouldn't make noise, Charis made his way out and snuck out of his bedroom.

"How many mass extinction events has the Earth endured?" Aravan had asked when Charis had walked into his office at the compound.

Charis hadn't sent a message first, but Aravan had been waiting for him anyway. The room was dark when Charis arrived, despite the morning hour, as Aravan's office is dark even compared to the rest of the underground compound. Aravan had been sitting in one of the heavy chairs surrounding his

octagonal card table, a lit catha cigar already throwing a trail of herbal-smelling smoke into the air.

“Seven. Ordovician-Silurian, Late Devonian, Capitanian, End Permian, Triassic-Jurassic, Cretaceous-Paleogene, and Holocene,” Charis answered.

Aravan set his cigar against the ashtray, steepling his fingers as he looked at Charis in a way that had made Charis feel like he was being dissected.

“A reasonable guess, but incorrect.”

Charis had felt his brows draw down as the reading assignments Aravan had given him during his three weeks of silence from Kat replayed in his memory.

“Does the one at the end of old-world history not count—?”

Aravan picked up his cigar again, shaking his head. “Quite the opposite. The seventh extinction is, in some ways, illustrative of the event that is ongoing now.” Aravan raised the cigar to his lips, taking a long pull before exhaling the smoke into the air between them. “As is the sixth. I want you to tell me why.”

Several long, uncomfortable minutes had followed after that as Charis thought through all the books he’d read before the trip to get Kat his monitor. When what Aravan was getting at finally dawned on him, Charis took a sharp breath.

“The asteroid.”

Charis's voice had been almost too quiet to his own ears. But Aravan is Sacrosanct, and his enhanced senses had been enough for him to hear Charis's answer.

"Good," Aravan said on another breath of smoke.

Once upon a time, a giant meteor twelve kilometers wide had crashed into a peninsula on the other side of the world.

The impact, as Charis had read not in his father's study, but in *Aravan's,* had left a crater nearly 200 kilometers wide, sending massive amounts of pulverized materials into the sky—including bits of rock from under the ocean that turned into sulfuric acid in the atmosphere. And for a period of about seven minutes, as those particles of rock started to fall back to the Earth, they generated a lot of heat. So much heat that the entire planet briefly heated up to temperatures dozen times greater than nearly any living thing could withstand.

Somehow, not all of the life on Earth was wiped out when the planet suddenly found itself being cooked alive. Things in the ocean, in particular, got relatively lucky in the blast, despite the huge waves that crashed into the continents for hours after the impact. But between the tiniest dust particles capable of remaining airborne and the smoke thrown up from the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of wildfires that erupted after the impact, a layer of dust and soot had blocked out the sun. The sulfuric acid in the atmosphere fell back down in the form of acid rain, contaminating much of the water. And all life that wasn't wiped out by these three catastrophes was then subjected to a prehistoric nuclear winter, one far more severe than any of the three that had followed the demise of humanity's own old world.

All that from a rock only twelve kilometers wide.

Arkana is dying, and Arkana is over forty times that size.

Far more than an asteroid, Arkana is a *moon*. It's visible from the ground, and it affects things on the ground, like what's left of the ocean, the same way the Earth's natural moon does. And of course, every inquiry to the mainframe about what will happen when its gravity stops keeping it afloat in its near-Earth orbit has gone unanswered.

"So when Arkana dies—it's not just going to kill everyone on the ship, is it?"

The words were out almost before Charis realized he'd spoken them. Aravan had taken a long pull from his cigar before answering.

"No one knows. Whether the early generations of its charges planned for Arkana's eventual demise is a mystery the mainframe itself may not even know. Until then, we operate with the understanding that the Sacrosanct, being fundamentally human despite their best efforts, are no better at planning for their collective death now than they were in the old world."

Aravan held Charis's gaze, then put his cigar out on the ashtray in front of him.

It's that look that has burned itself into Charis's brain as he sits in an agency transport en route to Arkana. Deja is next to him, her fingers dancing over the surface of a holoscreen as she flicks back and forth between various chains of messages too quickly for Charis to read. Deja is using conscious transcription

for the messages, anyway, and she's frighteningly good at it. Charis can't even tell how many people she's talking to right now.

After Deja had ushered Charis into the off-worlder, the first thing she had done had been to chide him about his arrest. Even as Charis had pulled up his discipline log, showing Deja the wiped entries, he'd repeated the first soldier's line that the whole thing was a misunderstanding, only for Deja to grab his left wrist at the sight of the active Obedience Protocol.

Then she'd sworn audibly in a language Charis didn't speak.

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," she'd promised, then released his wrist.

Now, Charis closes his eyes and tries to calm himself. At Aravan's advice, Charis had blocked Karra, Kat, and Leon's numbers that morning as he'd left Aravan's office, then gone straight to the hangar before anyone else woke up. "The military will be upset that you managed to escape, but they will be more malleable if you turn yourself in," Aravan had said.

He'd also said Charis shouldn't block Yen, because Yen will need to know where he is.

It didn't really make sense to Charis at the time, and it still doesn't, and Charis had known immediately that there were a lot of things Aravan wasn't telling him. Considering the Obedience Protocol, though, he thinks now that it's probably for the best.

While Deja works, he opens the photo he'd taken of Kat behind his eyelids so he could look at it without a holoscreen. Kat looks

younger in it, his face relaxed, his hair slightly fanned out over Charis's pillow, the arm he thinks is around Charis simultaneously loose and secure in a way that speaks of possessiveness.

It makes Charis's heart pull. He smiles, though it's a sad thing.

"Are you excited? Your first concert in almost six months?"

Charis sends the picture back to his memory bank and blinks his eyes open. Deja isn't looking at him yet, but she has turned more toward him, her crossed legs knocking against Charis's.

Deja is about the same age as Rafel, and she's the scariest person Charis has ever met. She was only a couple of years older than Charis is now when she'd graduated from law school and had gone straight into the largest, most influential talent agency in Central Command, cornered the director while she was coming back from a lunch meeting, and made her case right there in the lobby as to why they should hire her as an agent. And the rest, as they say, is history: Deja's eye for talent is second to none, and the *smallest* act she represents is a virally popular boy band Charis had mentored on a singing show the previous year.

Charis waits about as long as he can before answering Deja, which isn't long. She doesn't like to be kept waiting.

"Will you hate me if I say no?"

Deja's hands stop moving. Charis isn't looking at her, but he sees her turn to him in his peripheral vision, then sees her eyes once she moves her holoscreen out of the way and leans forward to look at him.

Deja is a full head shorter than Charis *with* her white platform pumps on, and looking him in the face means she has to scoot almost all the way off her chair in the agency off-worlder, her curtain of long, black hair sliding off the shoulder she's pulled it over as she leans forward. But Deja has always had a way of seeing through him—her and Xalia both—and there are certain things Charis can't hide from her any better than he'd be able to from Karra.

"It's going to be okay, you know that, right?"

She puts a hand on his knee, and Charis knows she means this sincerely. And yet, clearly he's been spending too much time around the Scaramandises lately, because he feels no guilt about the lie that comes out of his mouth.

"I just never thought I'd be this sad to leave."

Charis had gotten the banner message in the long-dead, old world language as soon as he'd left the compound, making straight for the agency, where he'd found Deja already waiting for him—a shock in itself, considering Deja hates Earth even more than Tauran did.

But apparently Tauran was *why* she had been there in person. Evidently Deja had made her case to someone very high up that since the military had been unable to collect Charis the first time and had cost her one of her biggest stars through that failure, then clearly Deja needed to do the job of collecting Charis herself. She would not lose Charis too.

Charis would appreciate that ferocity if it weren't also a cage. Deja squeezes Charis's knee where her hand rests on it as Arkana's plasma shield closes around them, the tall towers of

Central Command already practically close enough to touch. “You’re making the right choice. Arkana is your home, and you know our people need you more.”

As much as he wants to, Charis doesn’t argue.

A few minutes later, the transport docks with a gentle lurch. Deja pulls back her hand, stows her holoscreen, and stands, collecting her things and making her way to the door.

Charis follows. Since he’d gone right from the compound to the agency, he hadn’t brought anything with him aside from the clothes he’s wearing. Deja glances at his outfit and smiles.

“You look good,” she says.

Charis shrugs. “I figured I’d be on camera.”

Deja’s smile grows. “Well, yes, but that’s not what I mean. You look happy.”

This throws Charis enough that the door opens before Charis can respond. Deja loops her arm through his elbow and steers Charis out the door.

Had she not done so, Charis would have stopped in his tracks. At the end of the skybridge is a line of a dozen Arkanene soldiers in full tactical gear, all standing at attention, plasma rifles held diagonally down across their bodies. And behind them is an array of some of the most powerful and influential Sacrosancts in Central Command.

Charis’s heart nearly stops in his chest at the sight of the Arkanene Head of State near the center of the group.

Chancellor Volara's hands are clasped in front of her, her shoulder-length grey bob stick-straight and practically shimmering under the overhead lights in the second airlock. She smiles at Charis, though it doesn't reach her eyes.

The last time he'd seen Chancellor Volara had been before his parents' death. When she had still been a Senator, she'd been close colleagues with Charis's father, and her wife had gone to university with his mother, a friendship that had been renewed despite their lack of political alignment once Chancellor Volara and his father had won their Senate seats. Not long after his parents' death, and shortly after she'd been elected Chancellor, Charis had received a personal letter from her—along with early admission to Andromeda University, the most prestigious university in Central Command, to study politics, should he choose to accept.

Charis had been fourteen when he'd received that letter. Not yet in high school, university had been the absolute *last* thing on his mind. He'd burnt the letter with Leon on the roof of a destroyed building at the edge of the Boneyard and never thought of it again.

"*Mayaal,*" Deja swears again in that same mysterious language, and Charis looks down at her just in time to catch the edge of her expression before she schools her face to professional neutrality.

Deja is angry. Based on what she told him in the transport, Charis can see why. All the same, she knows better than to fight what is clearly a superseding order in front of Chancellor Volara. So, with one last squeeze to the inside of his elbow, she drops Charis's arm before they reach the end of the skybridge.

The soldiers in the center step back, admitting Charis before taking up a guard on either side of him, a move which separates him from Deja by several meters. Chancellor Volara looks back at him before making for the door of the second airlock, her press secretary and chief of staff at her side.

Charis doesn't want to be here. As they pass through into the first airlock, then inside the ship, the arrangement of people in the procession narrows, shoving Deja forward in the group with one last look at Charis until she's totally blocked by people taller than her. Already, Charis feels naked without her beside him.

That feeling grows the longer they walk. The soldiers' tactical helmets obscure their faces, and everyone else has their back to him, making Charis feel suddenly very alone even though he's surrounded by people on all sides. The streets are so clear that everyone's footsteps ricochet off the walls of the buildings they pass, the sound of them like machine gun fire until the ceiling opens up into the towering artificial sky of the center island, taking the echoes with it.

Something isn't right. He wants Karra. He wants Kat, too, but it's Karra who his mind flies to out of habit as another group of soldiers files in with the first, this one surrounding the contingent of powerful people like a shield against the rest of Arkana. And he wants to go home. Without prompting, Charis starts to think of the ground—not even anywhere specific, just the ground in general, a litany of places flashing through his mind at high speed.

The second Charis has those thoughts, a feeling like a spear lancing through his temples from end to end suddenly comes

over him, sharp and painful enough that he claps his hands over the sides of his eyes and crouches halfway to the ground, unable to keep himself from crying out.

What—

Something in his mind screams, a high-pitched whine like the sound grenade suddenly filling his ears. His vision starts to white out. He slams his eyes shut and moves his hands to his ears, but the light doesn't dim and the sound doesn't mute—almost like both are coming from *inside* his head rather than outside.

"*Veka,*" a low, female voice snarls behind him as the toe of a boot digs into his lower back. "*Pash.*"

Up, now.

Charis looks up, squinting his eyes. The artificial sunlight is blindingly bright all of a sudden. Apart from the soldier behind him and two at either side, no one else has stopped walking.

"*Pash,*" the soldier behind him demands again, louder this time.

Charis stands. As soon as he does, the stabbing pain in his temples lessens as the sound and the light disappear, though his head swims with vertigo in their wake.

There's a line of elegant white transports parked along the curb where the street they're currently walking down forms a T with what Charis assumes is the main looping artery of whatever sector they're in. Charis can't tell at a glance. One of the transports is parked across the road they're walking down,

blocking the entrance. The door to that one is open, and it's that one that the soldier behind him ushers Charis into, closing the door behind him without climbing in herself.

Deja is here. That's a relief.

So is Chancellor Volara, which is most definitely *not.*

The way Deja is sitting has Charis immediately on edge. She's turned toward the door, her legs crossed in a way that has made her tight white pencil skirt ride up a bit. Her right arm is crossed over her chest, clutching her cropped white blazer like a lifeline while she lays her monitor bare on the armrest of her seat.

Chancellor Volara's press secretary is inputting some kind of protocol directly into it. Charis's eyes fly to the Chancellor, then to Deja.

"Wait, what—? What is going on?! What about confidentiality rules, I thought no one could touch—"

"It's not for work, Chay," she says, meeting his eyes.

There's fear there. Real fear. Deja's dark brown skin has gone alarmingly pale.

For a long beat, Charis doesn't answer, just holds her eyes, trying to project reassurance even though he himself is about a half second away from an anxiety spiral. Then the Chancellor's press secretary inputs a command that makes a noise, and Deja's eyes flash wide, only to cloud over. Like she's looking at him without seeing him. Her pupils dilate, then retract, then go back to normal—then she blinks, and her eyes are clear again.

She lowers the arm with a death grip on her blazer, and Charis watches as she uncurls her fingers from it one by one, smooths out the wrinkles, and calmly shrugs it back over her shoulders. The press secretary balls up a handkerchief that appears to be spotted with blood, opening a flap next to his seat that sucks the soiled cloth down with a *hiss.*

The transport starts moving.

“Sit down, please, Velcharis,” says Chancellor Volara.

Charis sits.

The Chancellor doesn’t say anything immediately, just looks meaningfully at his seatbelt, then back at the holoscreen over her left arm. Charis quickly puts his seatbelt on, sitting up straight as he chances a glance at Deja.

Deja looks more relaxed, now. Her posture is perfect, like it always has been, but she’s sitting against the back of the chair now rather than on the edge of it. Her right hand is clasped lightly around her left wrist.

She isn’t looking at him anymore. It’s tempting to lean forward to try to catch her eyes, but with the way Chancellor Volara is watching him out of her peripheral vision, he thinks better of it. Instead, he takes a breath, relaxes his shoulders, and sits back against his own seat, trying to project a calm he absolutely does not feel.

After a minute or so, Chancellor Volara signs something on the holoscreen as she acknowledges Charis.

“Before you ask, Velcharis, Indeja *did* do something wrong.” Charis was going to ask, and the Chancellor’s pre-emption of his question sends a chill through him like a drop of ice water down his shirt. “Going to Earth to bring you here herself was a violation of her orders.”

“Her orders—?”

What orders? Charis thinks. None of this matches what Deja had told him in the transport. Deja isn’t a government official—but the Chancellor is already speaking again.

“Yes. When Tauran failed to collect you and was killed in the process, Indeja felt the need to assume responsibility, not realizing she was interfering in a highly classified enforcement action.”

Chancellor Volara stows her holoscreen and looks at Charis. Her eyes are blue in a way that makes him feel physically cold. “You’ve been very busy for the last few weeks, Chay.”

Somehow, hearing the intimate nickname come out of the Chancellor’s mouth snaps Charis immediately from fear to anger.

He sees what’s happening here. Deja has always been more protective of Charis than she was of Tauran—of any of her charges, really. She has never said as much, but she’s never needed to for Charis to understand that she sees him as a little brother, not just as a client. It was Deja who found him, and Deja is the only agent he’s ever had.

Despite what Tauran had nearly done to Charis, he feels a warm flash of pride for Deja at her defiance and turns to her slightly, trying not to let it show on his face.

The feeling of pride quickly curdles in his gut when he sees how still she's sitting. He can barely even see her breathing. Charis whips forward again to face the Chancellor.

"What did you do—*agh!!"*

The piercing feeling from before lances through his temples again, this time white-hot and *scalding*. Little bright lines pulsate in front of his eyes and the edges of his field of vision swim and turn strange colors for a long beat, ebbing with the pain once his thoughts quiet back down.

What is this, an electric fence in his brain?!

"Not exactly," Chancellor Volara answers.

Charis's blood runs cold. The smile the Chancellor is directing at him now is probably trying to be sympathetic, but it's doing a terrible job of it. When Charis raises his hands to his temples, he's surprised they aren't scorching hot.

"There's no need to fight me, Velcharis. I'm not going to hurt you, nor is anyone else here."

Charis flinches at this, but it's not in fear. It's in anger. Because it's incredibly obvious they've done *something* to Deja, almost like—

Well. Almost like they've turned her off. Like they've cut her power, or whatever it is that makes her *Deja.* Which shouldn't

be possible, but when Charis looks at Deja again, she barely even looks alive. She won't look at Charis.

It's almost like she *can't.*

"Indeja's problem is not disobedience, per se, it's ambition," Chancellor Volara says. Her smile has fallen, her face all business again, and it takes every ounce of Charis's willpower to keep his thoughts in check so he doesn't start mentally cursing at Arkana's apparently telepathic head-of-state. "Her ambition makes her unpredictable. So unpredictable that she saw it fit to disconnect from the mainframe and link her identity to a simulacrum capable of replicating her life perfectly from within her own dermal interface. Which we have suspected for years, though today was the first time we received definitive proof."

Charis blinks, then the implications of what Chancellor Volara just said hit him all at once.

Deja rigged to a sim. She rigged to a sim that she wears *on her person*. Even more, this sim has apparently allowed her to keep her mainframe access without subjecting her to its control.

"What?!" Charis whispers, so quietly he almost can't hear it. He meets the Chancellor's eyes, unable to keep the astonishment from his own. "I never knew—"

Charis cuts himself off before that train of thought escapes his mouth. He'd never known it was even *possible* to host a sim within your own skin monitor. Chancellor Volara smiles again, this one small and sympathetic.

“As you’re aware, Indeja is among the best at what she does. Neither I nor anyone else fault you for not noticing that she had performed an unlawful disconnect. But that is not why I have called you here.” The Chancellor pauses, looking at Charis in a way that makes his skin itch under the scrutiny. “I would like you to tell me now why you have so suddenly directed the curiosity you’ve abounded in since you were a child at the Kham Luk Gate.”

There’s an inquiry in Charis’s mind, then. It registers first as a question, long, ghostly fingers tapping at the door for entrance. When Charis refuses, Chancellor Volara lets out a soft sigh.

The next time, it comes as an order.

This is different than the pain in his temples. It’s more like a compulsion, like his brain is activating to answer the order without his consent. He *feels* himself think of the smoke, the way it had looked the day Charis had first seen it.

But something is wrong. Charis hadn’t gone alone, he knew that—not only would he never have been able to find the smoke by himself, he would never have survived the attack by desert marauders had he gone to the gorge alone.

Briefly, Charis starts to feel panic amidst the confusion, until he feels the compulsion release—and as soon as those tendrils let go and pull back out of his mind, his memories re-arrange into their correct form as his brain puts them away.

This makes no sense, but Charis also knows better than to question his good fortune. For the second time today, the lie falls so easily off his tongue that he doesn’t even have to think

about it as he spins the version of his memory that Chancellor Volara just saw into a tale.

“Please, it’s not like I was trying to do anything bad! I was just driving out there when I saw it.”

Chancellor Volara tips her head ever so slightly. She’s looking at Charis like a teacher would a misbehaving student, and Charis wants to scream.

“And you accidentally flew a cloaked transport to the entrance, I take it?”

Does she even need to ask?!

“I *promise,* I really was just trying to get a better look. That’s all. I turned around as soon as I got the signal that the shield wouldn’t open.”

This is *true,* Charis mentally insists. Nowhere on Earth is supposed to be off-limits to Sacrosancts. Charis allows himself to think freely, then, practically serving it on a platter while the Chancellor observes his reasoning in real time: if the place where the smoke comes from is off-limits, then Chancellor Volara can’t deny that there’s something behind the fence that Arkana is protecting.

Several beats of silence fall, and Charis’s heart races as he holds his thoughts as still as possible, dwelling deliberately on the mystery of why he’s in trouble right now, why Chancellor Volara should care, and what Deja has to do with any of it. As the silence stretches, he takes a long look at Deja while Chancellor Volara continues to scrutinize him, and that short

look is enough that his concern for Deja starts screaming louder than any other thought.

Charis flicks his eyes forward again. He knows the worry he's feeling right now is clear on his face, and he doesn't try to hide it. Chancellor Volara lets out a breath.

"Well. As troubling as your adventures may be, you are here now. You're safe, and that's what matters."

That...did not go the direction Charis thought it would.

Even stranger, Chancellor Volara closes her eyes, takes another breath—and when she opens them again, it's not cool detachment that's on her face. It's something more like concern.

"Perseira, Dracarma, turn your ears off," Chancellor Volara orders.

Not Deja, Charis notes. His worry flares again, certain now that they've done something to her without her consent. But the Chancellor's chief of staff and press secretary quickly raise fingers to each of their ears as directed, temporarily deafening themselves and turning their faces away for good measure.

Chancellor Volara's whole demeanor shifts, then. Suddenly, it isn't the Arkanene head-of-state in front of him, but someone he recognizes straight out of his past.

"You're correct, Charis. I'm concerned about you. Not only because you're Lyrian and Mensiria's son, but because you're starting to sound like your mother."

...What.

What is going on right now? Charis asks himself. Chancellor Volara may have been friends with his parents, but she hasn't been an active part of his life since their death. What right does she even have to be concerned—?

"I have followed your career with interest," the Chancellor answers. The uneasiness at the fact she is answering questions he isn't asking aloud redoubles, and Chancellor Volara's expression softens. "Your parents would have been proud of you, not least because of the way you've been taking care to create for the grounder population as well as our own."

"...Is that a bad thing?" Charis ventures, aloud this time.

She's still not answering him. There's a beat, then the Chancellor interlaces her fingers in front of her, the concern in her eyes acquiring a cast of grief, and the only thought in Charis's mind is that it's very strange to see the leader of the Arkanene government show this much emotion.

"Charis, are you aware of why your parents were assassinated?"

No, Charis thinks.

He's never known. He's never *wanted* to know. For a while, both various media outlets and basically everyone in the Central Command circles his family had occupied were speculating, often in his and Karra's presence. Part of why he'd run to music when he had was to get away from the whispers.

"No," Charis answers honestly.

Why this? Charis thinks, unable to stop his train of thought as the questions keep coming. Why now? Why is Chancellor Volara suddenly so interested in him? It's been nearly *seven years*— and what does Deja have to do with this?!

Charis cuts off his train of thought as the Chancellor's face provides the answer her next words corroborate.

"Your parents were close friends of mine for a very long time, Charis. Mensiria shared both your heart and your curiosity, and she discussed these things with your father frequently. Their lobbying against our enforcement of the class system of Earth was one component of their eventual objective."

"Which was what?" Charis asks, his voice thick now with real confusion.

Chancellor Volara's eyes harden again, though not completely. It's more like the look of someone who made the same argument for a long time with no success.

She and his parents really *were* closer than Charis had ever realized.

"To convince the Sacrosanct to abandon our home and return to Earth."

Charis's heart skips in his chest.

He has so many questions. *So* many questions, and neither the time nor the context he needs to even know where to start. He tries anyway.

"*What* does this have to do with my agent?!"

Chancellor Volara doesn't answer. Instead, she glances at her staff—and apparently sends a command to their monitors, as they both look down at the same time and then raise a finger to their ears again, turning them back on.

The transport stops. Someone in a smart white suit opens the door. The Chancellor's chief of staff and press secretary file out first, followed by Deja.

A couple beats later, Chancellor Volara stands to exit as well. In that time, she has turned back from a close friend of his late parents to the Arkanene Head of State.

"Your agent is an insurrectionist who is part of a guerrilla group attempting to realize your parents' objective in the wake of their death."

She steps down out of the transport, holding the door for Charis as though this knowledge doesn't turn everything he has ever known about Deja on its head, sending him immediately into a tailspin. She looks at him when she speaks again.

"Prepare yourself, Velcharis. You are about to step onto the most important stage you have ever stood on. I expect you to shine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As soon as they were off the transport, both Kat and Karra were on edge.

Kat hadn't been able to ask the question of the mainframe himself after the hard loop virus had been injected, but Yen had supplied the answer while they were still on the transport: the blackout district is where the military conducts what are called *hard physical* operations, a kind of training that does not allow the use of any technology other than anything physiologically hardwired in their bodies. It's also surrounded by something akin to a physical firewall, scrambling any kind of signal that tries to come in or out.

It makes sense why they've landed there, but it's also meant he and Karra have had to communicate aloud, in words, which makes it harder to stay hidden.

Yen had given them as much intel as he could. The Collection is apparently what it sounds like, a huge gathering of Sacrosancts somewhere in Central Command. But the plans for it are so old that they pre-date the ship's named sectors, and all Yen had been able to give them was a name that meant nothing to either of them.

Arcady. As though that didn't just sound like the name of the ship through twelve rounds of a game of telephone. Karra seems to echo his frustrations.

"*Dammit,* I wish we could look things up right now," Karra practically shouts.

Kat shoves Karra's arm and glares, miming zipping his lips shut. He has already had to remind Karra to tuck his pistol away out of sight—a real gun, not a plasma gun, since actual bullets are faster than plasma fire. Real guns are illegal on Arkana, and Kat hadn't had time to apply white casts to theirs to disguise them before they'd gone up. One of many things he hadn't had time to do.

Kat's own knife and gun feel twice as heavy in his pockets as he shakes his head to clear it, looking around at where they are.

"Why is it so quiet?" He asks Karra, keeping his voice as low as possible.

Karra isn't looking at him, he's looking around as well, but he shakes his head.

"I don't know. This isn't somewhere I've ever been. I just know commands from every system get scrambled in the blackout district."

They stop at a corner that T's into a wider street, looking in both directions. Kat listens carefully for any difference in volume of sound coming from any particular direction—because his navigation system is scrambled, though, it's hard to tell which way leads to the interior of the central island.

But after a moment, Kat notices a slight difference. *Very* slight. There's a light wind moving through the district, and the interior of the island is warmer than the wide bridge the blackout district is located on. The wind would be flowing toward warmer air.

"This way," he says, nodding to the left with his chin.

They follow meandering streets for a few more minutes before they reach a squared-off arch that's made of some kind of black stone. He and Karra look at each other at the same time. Kat's hand flies automatically to the outside of the hip pocket where his knife is, fingers curling lightly over the hilt. But they pass through without incident, and as soon as they're on the other side, a feeling like the silencing of static immediately comes over Kat, and his navigation system comes back online.

He looks back at Karra, still keeping his voice low. "Did you feel that?"

"What?"

No, then, Kat thinks. Probably because Karra isn't connected to the mainframe. Kat shakes his head.

"Nothing."

Karra's brows cross in disapproval. "It's not nothing. If you noticed something, tell me, we need to be on the same page."

A fair point, Kat concedes. He's so used to working alone that any kind of team mechanics don't come naturally to him.

"Check your nav," Kat says.

Karra shakes his head. "Nothing. I already have. It's been spinning since we got up here, even before we got into the blackout district. I apparently only have nav on the ground."

Kat lets out a breath through his nose, then nods once. They keep moving.

The blackout district opens into what might be an industrial area, though it's hard to tell what anything is when everything around them is white. Still, it's only a minute or so before they stumble across their first stroke of good luck.

There's a transport parked outside a warehouse. Kat stops once he spots it, quickly grabbing Karra's wrist to still him as well as he listens carefully for sounds of movement.

Nothing. Kat runs a finger up the inside of his tragus, dialing up the sensitivity in his ears almost as high as it will go, until he can hear Karra's heartbeat beside him.

Still nothing. No human sounds, and no machine sounds anywhere near them.

Kat won't look a gift horse in the mouth. He dials the sensitivity back down to something that won't constantly distract him, then waves Karra over to the transport and drops down in front of the front fender, pressing his palm down flat along the seam of the hood until he finds where the catch is located.

"Are you going to hotwire it?" Karra asks, like it isn't incredibly obvious this thing won't do any good for them otherwise.

"I sure am," Kat answers, then draws his knife.

This blade isn't the one he usually carries. The one he usually carries is curved carbon steel, nearly the length of his forearm from hilt to tip, and Kat misses it dearly as he works the much smaller blade he's brought with him into the seam of the hood until he feels it hit the catch. A few beats later, he's figured out which direction it folds and pushes his knife in from the front until he feels the catch release.

The hood lifts open on silent hinges, and Kat quickly surveys the landscape of mechanical and electrical components in front of him until he finds the wires he's looking for.

He cuts small holes in the insulation of each, then swears. He doesn't have clip leads. He racks his brain for anything else that will work, then looks up when the idea dawns on him.

He needs something metal to connect the wires. And it might not work, but it's the best they have.

"Karra. I need your necklace."

"*Absolutely not*," Karra snaps from behind him. "Our mother gave these to us—"

"Do you want Charis back or not?"

Kat is glaring at Karra over his shoulder, still holding the wires he's cut into so he doesn't lose track of them. Karra glares at Kat in apparent impasse for a few seconds, then apparently the fight leaves him, as he closes his eyes, grits his teeth, and exhales through his nose, then takes off the chain and places it in Kat's hand.

There's a beat before Karra pulls his hand back. Kat does not audibly thank him, but he does hold Karra's eyes for a moment before turning back to the task at hand.

By the time Kat jumps back and out of the way of the sparks that fly as the engine kicks to life, Karra is leaning against the outer hull of the transport, a hand on the open door.

For a second, Kat just looks at him.

“How did you get that open?”

Karra rolls his eyes. “It was open. Come on.”

He climbs into the transport. Kat closes the hood and follows.

Inside, Karra has the transport’s GPS pulled up on a holoscreen, navigating around it like someone who obviously knows what they’re looking at. For the first time, he is very glad that Karra spent as much of his life on Arkana as he did, a thought that rebounds as Karra steers them easily out of the district with only occasional glances at the map.

The transport changes everything, though. It isn’t especially fast, but it’s way faster than walking—especially since the streets are deserted. Even as they move further and further into the central island, every sector they pass seems completely devoid of people.

“Where is everyone?” Karra asks, echoing Kat’s thoughts.

Kat shakes his head. He has no idea either, and it’s becoming unsettling.

“Just keep going toward Central Command,” Kat answers. “We have to pass someone eventually.”

And sure enough, as Karra steers them closer and closer toward the center of the ship, industrial districts transition to places that are more public in nature. The commercial districts they pass through become more and more polished, clean, and mainstream the further in they go.

It's in one of these districts that they finally begin to encounter other people. Someone crosses the road in front of the transport, their back to Kat and Karra through the windshield.

Karra slows to a crawl as they approach what looks like a main artery within the district. Then, suddenly, Karra spots something that makes his eyes go wide as he makes a sound of recognition.

"Ah, okay. I know where we are now," Karra says, supplying the answer before Kat can ask. "Sagittarius North. We're basically one district removed from Central Command."

Kat wouldn't know, but he nods anyway, watching as the people pass by the transport. Some of them are coming out of shops whose doors they close behind them, flipping signs to *closed,* others downstairs from residences in the stories above.

No one seems to be paying attention to him and Karra. Even weirder, everyone is on foot. There are transports, scooters, and hoverboards all around, all of them stationary.

At one point, Kat sees movement in the rearview behind the transport and turns to see a middle-aged man closing down a shop and walking past them with a blank look in his eyes, like he's looking at Kat and Karra without seeing them. Once he passes, Kat and Karra look at each other again.

"Let's follow him," Karra says, switching to Arkane now that there are people within earshot. "Everyone is walking the same direction, seems like he knows something we don't."

Kat nods. Karra parks the transport. And with one last, longing look at the hood of the transport from Karra, they follow.

The further inside they go, the more people fill the streets. People of all ages and genders, all in white—some of them on their own, some in pairs, others entire families, all of them moving the same direction as though compelled and none of them sparing either him or Karra a second glance. It's eerie, though it does make it easier to disappear into the throng of people once it gets thick enough to fill an entire street.

Considering the size of Arkana as a whole, Central Command is small. The false-sky ceiling is at its tallest there, some of its buildings towering hundreds of stories up, connected to one another by a web of skybridges not unlike the ones that stretch from Arkana's central island to the outer ring.

"That's the Borealis Ring," Karra says as they start to pass under what looks like a thick, circular skybridge that wraps around the towers of Central Command like the rings of Saturn. When Kat looks at Karra in confusion, Karra continues. "The outer limit of Central Command. Also the oldest part of the ship."

Kat looks up. The skybridge, which must span at least ten kilometers from outer edge to outer edge, is nearly transparent, faintly iridescent in a way that reminds Kat of the shields that skin monitors can deploy. There are long, driverless transports stopping and starting at certain intervals on both sides, but no one seems to be getting in or out of them.

Instead, there's a noise. It sounds like it's coming from the ship itself: deep, resonating *thumps*, as though from massive drums, a dozen of them in succession. The pulses last a full minute, each spaced in intervals of five seconds—until the last one sounds and it seems like all of Arkana falls silent, other than the sounds of footsteps.

The artificial sun dims. The sides of every building light up with a video projection. Beneath it, the crowd keeps moving.

A figure in white steps into the frame, raising both hands to the crowd as though to embrace them. Karra swears in Arkane beside him.

"Ishada. That's Chancellor Volara," he bites out through gritted teeth.

"My fellow Arkanenes," Chancellor Volara says from seemingly everywhere. Her voice is coming through so many speakers that it's impossible to tell where it's originating from. *"From the dawn of the second world, our forebears knew and planned for this day. Every step we've taken, every leap into boundless space, every thought and breath and technological stride we have made—all has had its purpose. Everything we have made, we have made for the age that begins today."*

"What the fuck is she talking about?" Kat hisses beside Karra without turning to face him.

"I don't know. But we need to keep moving."

The camera pans back, then, and the image that fills the darkened windows of the two skyscrapers Kat and Karra pass between amid the throng of people makes Kat stop in his tracks.

The crowd is *enormous.* So massive that it's blocked out into sections like a grid. When it pans to its widest point, Kat snaps a picture with his eyes: eleven long, eight deep, all of them assembled in front of a stage so large it must take up multiple

city blocks in front of a stately, domed building framed by carved spires at each corner.

People are still filing into the assembly as the Chancellor speaks.

"Today marks the first day in over a thousand years that all the Sacrosanct have gathered together. Today, you have answered the call. You are all here, you are all counted. Not a single one is lost."

"That's the Senate building," Karra says, grabbing Kat's wrist to tug him forward again.

Before Kat can shake off Karra's grip, Kat's monitor alerts him. A set of off-world coordinates flashes on the screen—they're from Yen, though they're showing as a classified number. Kat quickly enters them into his nav.

"So today, we swear allegiance: to Arkana, to each other. To every person who has come before whose knowledge and work we build on. This beacon of light, our shining nation in the stars; our past, our future, our new dawn."

"Karra."

Karra looks at Kat, waiting.

"How quickly can we get to that stage?"

"Today and always, we make this promise: to always live in harmony, for the good of the body to whom we belong."

Karra's brows cross. "It's probably another two and a half, three kilometers—why?"

Kat yanks his wrist free, holding his left forearm face-up so Karra can read it.

“Attention, now, for the Arkanene Anthem of Allegiance.”

As soon as Karra looks up from Kat’s monitor, the camera cuts back, and the opening notes of the score to the Anthem starts to play just as Charis’s face fills the side of every tower in Central Command.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"*Karra.* Where is this? Where is he?!"

Suspended on some kind of shield, apparently. The camera cuts back, revealing Charis in the center of a platform one level above Chancellor Volara that looks as insubstantial as smoke, but is somehow holding not only him, but an entire orchestral ensemble. The musicians, whose instruments look only marginally more substantial than the platform they're suspended on, are seated in a semicircle in front of the robotic conductor.

All around them, Charis's beautiful, stolen voice rings out from everywhere, clear as a bell as he sings what must be the Anthem of Allegiance.

"Il daw ager ida velat,
al lux lo rasresham.
Vastar, makorn petam audir
Arkana, son idam."

Beyond the astral field, no lesser eye has seen. Rapture, hear the people sing; the world reborn beyond.

Karra is staring at the image projected on the buildings like he's seen a dead person come back to life, and Kat doesn't know whether to slap him or to stand back and let him try to get a better read on where they are. Between the two of them, it's Karra who knows Central Command as more than just a map, but the longer he just *stands there*—

"...*veka i son shanasam*—this way," Karra says, the first half of his sentence nearly unintelligible.

It's very strange to hear Karra reverting to his native accent in Arkane. Unlike Charis, Karra was a teenager when his family moved permanently to Earth—and though he has tried *hard* in that time to bury his off-worlder accents in both Arkane and the common language, there have been more than a few times when Kat had caught him stressed out and muttering to himself in his native Central Command dialect when he thought there was no one within earshot. So when Karra grabs Kat's wrist and starts tugging him to the edge of the crowd, Kat lets himself be led.

"Chadi kring set lalangas,
machum raban de shas."

We have made dream reality; this is our freedom.

Karra is making for one of the towers. The doors are unlocked, so Karra hauls them right inside, then to a stop, dropping Kat's wrist and scanning frantically around the empty, darkened lobby for the elevators. The sound from outside turns muddy and unintelligible as the building's doors close again.

When Karra spots the elevators, he starts running. Kat follows. He's only a few steps behind, but Karra is already hammering the *up* arrow in front of him when Kat joins him, practically tapping his feet in irritation as he looks around for some kind of sign that the elevators are in fact coming.

There's nothing. They remain dark.

"*Varaisho,* is the power out—?"

Karra isn't watching his volume, and Kat scans quickly around behind them to make sure no one heard. It appears no one

did—and when about half a minute passes with no sign of the elevators, Karra wheels around on his heel to face Kat.

“Stairs?!”

Kat nods in the direction of the stairs he’d spotted just now, this time only half a step behind when Karra takes off toward them.

“Save your energy,” Kat says, grabbing the handle. This door, too, is open—does *anyone* on Arkana believe in locked doors?!—and at Karra’s incredulous look, he grabs Karra’s bicep, hard. “I’m serious. Pace yourself. We’re not going to get Charis out if we exhaust ourselves trying to find him—”

Karra breaks free and starts booking it up the stairs.

Kat can’t blame him. His own heart is hammering in his chest, his fear and worry white-hot as his body viscerally recalls the scene he’d encountered at the enforcement job before Yen had freed Charis, his mind screaming *find him find him FIND HIM* as he lets the door fall closed and follows Karra. Up, up, *up*—by the ninth or tenth floor, they’re both winded, but Kat has caught Karra and is only a couple of steps behind him when Karra rips open a landing door and runs inside.

“We need to find the bridge gate. Get to the Borealis Ring and take the skytrain, it’s the fastest way—”

Kat can’t even tell what kind of building they’re in. It’s probably some kind of office, but he barely registers its contents as Karra makes for the side of the building facing the Borealis Ring. Karra doesn’t know where he’s going, but at the same time, he somehow *does*—and by the time Kat catches him again, Karra is

already waiting in front of what he assumes to be the door they're looking for, abject panic on his face.

"It's *locked—*"

Kat charges past him, his knife already open as he strikes the huge glass panel with his blade.

It shatters. Kat deploys a shield around his hand and cuts away enough of the glass that they can walk through, then steps out of the gap without waiting to see if Karra followed.

There's a station of some kind about thirty meters from the door, most of it shaded under a long building overhang from one of the floors above. There are times stamped on it.

"Next train in two minutes," Karra says, a little more winded than usual. "Sometimes I forget you're actually a criminal."

"Sometimes I forget you're actually an off-worlder socialite," Kat snaps back.

Karra huffs, nearly a laugh despite the circumstances, and Kat almost smiles. "*Ya shul,*" Karra says, letting his native accent through.

As soon as the train arrives, though, they're all business again. He and Karra practically fly onto the lead car, grabbing various handholds as the doors close and the train starts moving again. Kat leans against the back rail while Karra practically plasters himself to the front, naming each stop as they pass until the one they're apparently looking for comes into view.

“It’s that one. Draco East. When this stops, we take the stairs down to ground level. We’ll approach from the side and use the crowd as cover when we get closer.”

Kat is standing at the door as the train slows, trying and failing to keep the irritation with this half-baked plan out of his voice. “And *how* exactly are we going to get him down from there if we’re in the crowd?”

Karra joins Kat and looks at him.

“We’re not. We have to wait for him to come down and then intercept him before he re-joins whoever he came with.”

Kat doesn’t have time to argue. The doors open, then they’re both running down the stairs.

This time, Kat hangs back just enough for Karra to lead, following when Karra makes a right and then starts booking it in the direction of the Senate. Kat is faster than Karra, though, and he catches him and grabs his shoulder, stopping both of them.

“Don’t run. There’s no cover. It’s too conspicuous,” Kat says through heavy breaths.

Karra’s eyes flash in anger for a beat before he yields. He nods once, shrugging out of Kat’s grip as he affects the calm stride of the people in the crowd they’d followed into Central Command. It’s a terrible imitation, at least until Karra finally gets a grip and shakes his head once to clear it, then *actually* starts walking calmly, just a hair faster than the people ambling into the crowd around them.

Without stopping, Karra scans down the line of people in front of them. There are signs demarcating the various sectors of Arkana in front of the various blocks, and Karra laughs once, audibly, when he locks onto one in particular.

“Lucky break number two,” Karra says under his breath. He glances at Kat, nodding toward the Vela block of the crowd. “That’s the sector Charis and I were born in. Probably the group I’d be going to anyway if I were part of the hive.”

The block is at the furthest corner of stage right, just off from a staircase that hadn’t been visible in the shot that had been projected on the tower windows, and Kat has to fight to maintain his focus as he follows Velkarra into and then through the crowd in that sector. The crowd is mostly stationary, getting thicker and younger the further they go until Karra grabs Kat’s wrist and starts navigating through shoulder-first, not apologizing to anyone.

Quickly, though, it becomes apparent that they don’t have to. It’s very strange. The people’s eyes are blank, like the man in the street’s had been—looking at them without really seeing them. And the crowd isn’t fully stationary, but even though they bump against everyone they pass, no one looks twice at them.

At least, not until they near the front of the crowd, when a young woman with stick-straight, pale brown hair turns in their direction.

Kat meets her eyes, trying not to trip over his feet as he’s hauled through the crowd. First it’s the one. Then, a beat later, a middle-aged man with dark skin and tightly-coiled hair and a hand on a boy no older than eight turns to them as well.

Then two more. Then four.

"*Karra*, look—"

Eight. Sixteen. Kat loses count.

Someone starts to grab his shoulder.

"*Go. Now,*" Kat orders.

Karra doesn't need to be told twice. He yanks Kat through the crowd half-blind, dodging hands and swaying bodies with every step.

The crowd is thick, now, oppressive and hot as hundreds of hands attempt to grab him and Karra from every direction. Kat rips them away with every step, fighting the temptation to grab his knife and cut them away by force. Before long, Kat has his back to Karra, their arms threaded together for balance as Kat braces against Karra's back and forcefully kicks people away from them, buying them enough time and freedom of movement for Karra to lever over the barrier at the front of the crowd.

There are hands all over Kat as soon as he turns forward again, and Kat fights *hard* to keep a hold of the barrier as they reverse roles and Karra starts swinging at them, driving as many of them off Kat as he can. But it isn't enough—Karra can't clear any space from that side, and one manages to get enough of a grip on Kat's wrist to pry it free from the barrier—

Kat whirls around and turns the man's arm backward, hauling him heavily over his own shoulder as the shoulder dislocates and the man falls flat on the ground. The crowd stumbles over

his body, and it's enough that Kat can grab the barrier again and swing over it.

Kat looks up at the stage. Charis is looking straight at them, his eyes wide with fear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The start of the Collection passes in a blur.

Or maybe it isn't the start. When they'd approached Polaris Row, the long promenade where all the most important buildings in Central Command are located, the crowd in front of the Senate building had just looked like a normal crowd. Once Charis had climbed the stairs to the stage behind Chancellor Volara and seen just how many people were truly there, though, his first thought after the shock had passed was that this had to be the entire population of Arkana all standing in front of them.

Chancellor Volara had looked at him, nodded, then directed him to take his seat. He hadn't known where that was until a tug in his brain directed his eyes up to the second level, where there was a single empty chair on one side of the musicians arranged in a semicircle at the back.

The tug in his mind is the same one he's been feeling every so often since Charis got out of the transport. The only thing, if Charis is being honest, that is allowing him to keep to the program the Chancellor had ordered him to follow. Gone is the electric fence feeling—now that Chancellor Volara knows he's not going to fight orders, she isn't policing him as rigidly anymore, though she's also never far from his mind, literally or figuratively.

Charis had climbed the stairs and sat. Someone handed him a folded paper, then, yellowed with age, and Charis had nodded his thanks without looking to see who it was.

Now, Charis opens the paper and blinks. Inside is a song, one Charis doesn't know. The text beneath each line is written in a looping, old-fashioned script Charis can't read. But there isn't enough time to worry about why this had been handed to him before he feels the tug in his brain again, this time directing him to stand as Chancellor Volara calls him up to sing the Anthem of Allegiance.

Charis stands, walking past the conductor as he steps up to the microphone in the center of the stage.

He knows the Anthem. He's known it since he was old enough to form complete sentences. Still, as the opening measures sound out behind him, Charis feels panic rise up his throat as he looks out into the crowd and the words utterly leave him.

Only to reappear a beat later just before his cue.

It's just the opening phrase, but it's apparently enough, because he leans into his training, lets the nerves wash over him, and blinks, then takes a breath and starts to sing, trying to trust the rest of the words to come.

And they do. Charis sings, trying to project confidence as he looks out into the crowd, avoiding the hovering camera in front of him so it doesn't catch his eyes.

Charis doesn't have to be prompted to sit down again once the Anthem is finished. It's blessedly short, and Chancellor Volara stands again on the stage below him once the music fades to silence.

While she speaks, Charis opens the paper he'd been handed again. It's so old the pages seem like they would tear were they

not preserved somehow, and that along with the text in the long-dead language the words below the staff are written in is enough to tell Charis that the song he's holding is truly ancient. It's been a very long time since he's tried to read a dead language, though, and he only manages about a measure worth of words he can barely pronounce before Chancellor Volara glances up at Charis from the stage below him, then takes a step back as a young, dark-skinned grounder woman with long braids woven together like a crown on her head steps up to the microphone, reading a poem about togetherness and unity.

He feels the tug in his brain again, harder this time, and he freezes in his seat as the order crystallizes in his mind.

I expect you to shine.

He has to sing this. Charis has to *sing* this, and he has no idea what it says. He can read the melody easily—apparently musical notation hasn't changed in the last few hundred years, or however long it's been since this song was written—but the words are sludge in his brain, an incoherent, unintelligible hum that makes no sense and feels alien on his tongue even without speaking.

There's another order. It doesn't really go to him, more that it's *about* him, and Charis glances down at Chancellor Volara, whose back is to him now, then back at the paper in front of him, trying to push back his discomfort that the mainframe and Chancellor Volara are talking about him behind his back.

Except when Charis looks down at the paper again, he can suddenly read it.

It's not complete understanding. The unfamiliar script has resolved in his brain in a way Charis can't really describe—he still doesn't know what the words *say,* only how to pronounce them, and he gives in to the tug easily when it tells him to read.

He reads quickly. As quickly as he can. This song, whatever it is, is a fair bit longer than the Anthem, and Charis is only halfway through the final stanza when the woman on the stage below finishes her poem and takes a seat behind Chancellor Volara.

There's a beat. Adrenaline floods through his body like cold water, then doesn't—like a spigot that's been cut off. But Charis barely has time to register the strangeness of his body acting without his accord before the tug in his brain directs him to stand, and he quickly snaps a picture of the lyrics with his eyes.

There's movement in the crowd below. It's off to one side of the stage, an eddying river of people converging on one spot, and Charis turns in that direction only to freeze in place as every muscle in his body turns to stone.

For a few long beats, all of time seems to slow, and Charis watches in horror as all at once, the Vela crowd starts converging on Kat and Karra, so fast and sudden that Charis barely notices when the orchestra kicks back to life.

Kat meets his eyes. He's mouthing something Charis can't discern from here—the same word. Charis shakes his head. He sees Kat looks down, then up, and then he disappears in a flurry of movement, slipping out from the crowd's grip and off toward somewhere he can't see from here.

Charis's heart seizes as he bites back a fresh wave of panic. Every cell in Charis's body is already screaming to get down there. Charis has no idea what's happening, only knows with breathtaking certainty that he needs to do everything he can to keep Kat and Karra safe.

Charis raises the microphone again and turns to face the musicians for a moment, conjuring a smile from nothing more than muscle memory as he turns back to the crowd.

Only for a new swell of panic to latch its claws into his gut as the melody Charis has just learned suddenly goes silent in his head.

The opening movement of this song is longer than the one for the Anthem, and it's a couple of long, slow measures before the tug in his brain tells Charis to close his eyes. So he does. Without Charis's prompting, then, the picture he'd just snapped appears behind his eyelids, and Charis dials his focus in on the opening line without further direction.

Just in time for his cue.

Briefly, Charis chances a look down at the crowd, and he feels a surge of relief when he sees the crowd beginning to still again. The few that are making for the barrier stop in their tracks, then stand up straight. Charis closes his eyes again.

He can do this. He can sing, especially when the music seems to be calming the people down. Slowly, the faces of the people in the Vela sector start turning forward again, and Charis aims a smile at them specifically.

For the next verse, Charis digs deep into his acting training, belting out with a confidence that suggests he believes whatever shit is coming out of his mouth. And when the orchestra transitions into an instrumental bridge before the final stanza, Charis looks out into the crowd again, all sides of it, moving back to front and finishing close to the stage.

Kat and Karra are gone. Again, Charis's stomach seizes, and he turns his head as much as he dares without giving their potential location away.

And then it's over. He doesn't even remember singing the final verse. The camera cuts away, and Charis feels that same tug in his brain, this time directing Charis to go down the stairs again, and Charis's body moves again without his accord.

There's a line of masked soldiers waiting for him at the bottom. Six of them. Dracarma, the Chancellor's press secretary, is off to one side of the line, looking sternly at Charis.

Except he isn't. Charis already knows that, but it's no less eerie to see the vacant look in Dracarma's eyes as Charis meets them from a few paces away. His manager Xalia is off toward the side of the stage he'd come down, as are a few others Charis recognizes as agency staff, and the sight of them holds none of the relief it ordinarily would. None of them are looking at him, if they even can.

Charis's eyes fly around as he looks for Deja. They'd been separated when Charis went onstage with Chancellor Volara. But he can't see her, and the soldiers close in around Charis and Dracarma in a ring as soon as Charis steps away from the ladder, blocking his view.

He knows where they're taking him. There's a transport waiting on the other side of the stage, out of the line of sight of both the crowd and the cameras, and Charis tries and fails to swallow down the fear that rises up in him about whatever will happen next as the soldiers lead him and Dracarma toward the transport.

His mind is blank, a haze of greyish static. For the first time today, Charis misses the tug in his brain.

One of the soldiers opens the transport door. Charis looks at them—their mask isn't quite as opaque as the ones his agency guards wear, enough that he can tell this soldier is a man.

And then Charis watches, dumbfounded, as another soldier surges forward and breaks his neck.

One of the soldiers behind him rushes into action as well, sweeping the legs out from one of the two next to him and delivering a savage kick down where their helmet meets their neck. That one twitches. The first attacker yanks the soldier nearest Charis away from him by the wrist and gets them in a headlock, and Charis hears their neck snap.

"Karra, behind you—"

The second attacker—*Karra,* apparently—reaches behind him blind and grabs the last soldier and flips them over his shoulder. She lands with a grunt, and Kat darts forward and delivers two clean blows into the chests of each soldier on the ground before rounding on Dracarma.

Dracarma has a plasma pistol drawn. Kat knocks it out of his hand just as he pulls the trigger, sending the shot wide and

vaporizing a hole in the open transport door. Before Charis has time to blink, Kat has drawn his knife across Dracarma's neck, and he wheels around on his heel just as Karra hauls Charis into the transport.

"*Now,* Kat—"

Kat slams the door behind him. Karra is already climbing over the center console into the driver's seat, navigating the wheel one-handed as he hands something back to Kat that Kat accepts without looking at it as he turns Charis's face toward him.

Kat has taken his helmet off, so Charis has a full view of the near panic on his face that melts instantly away when he sees the look in Charis's eyes.

"He's not hived," Kat says to Karra, though he's still looking at Charis.

Karra has picked up speed as he steers the long transport down one of the main thoroughfares that leads to Polaris Row.

"You remember how to disconnect him?"

Kat nods once, then apparently remembers Karra can't see it. "Yes."

Without looking away from Charis, Kat drops his hand to Charis's wrist and pulls up his left sleeve. "Unlock your monitor for me, Angel," he says, just for Charis.

Charis unlocks his monitor. Kat turns Charis's forearm gently until it's facing him, then enters a complicated protocol so fast

Charis can't even see what he's doing. Then he squeezes Charis's wrist. "Deep breath."

He hits a command that beeps, and Charis inhales sharply as the memory of Dracarma doing something like this to Deja grabs hold of Charis's gut and squeezes.

But there's nothing. He doesn't go glassy, doesn't fall asleep. Instead, there's something like a quieting of Charis's mind as his connection to the mainframe is turned off. And a beat later, Kat inserts a vial of black liquid into his forearm with a long needle, quickly expelling the contents, then pulling the needle free.

Then he leans down and *licks* the small bead of blood, sending a shiver through Charis despite the circumstances. By the time it's gone, Charis's body has already closed the wound.

Kat looks up at Charis, then releases his wrist. Karra makes a noise.

"Did you seriously have to do that?"

"I didn't have anything else," Kat snaps back.

"Deja," Charis says.

Charis sees Kat's brows cross as he spins forward in his seat to face Karra.

"*Karra.* We have to get Deja, she's in trouble."

"Are you being serious right now?!" His brother practically shouts. "We *don't* have time, they're probably already following us—"

“She *helped* me, Karra! She was trying to protect me—"

“Right, after you *ran away* here—”

“Where is she?” Kat asks, still in that quiet tone, and Charis swallows his retort that it hadn’t been his idea to come to Arkana at all. It still cuts Karra off, and Charis feels a little wave of relief that Kat gets it. Or seems to. Or is at least listening.

Kat’s gloved hand is on Charis’s leg, now, and Charis turns around in his seat again until he’s facing Kat, suddenly awash with guilt over having put the look on Kat’s face that’s currently there. He answers anyway.

“I don’t know for sure. Chancellor Volara took her. I couldn’t see her, I think she was taken somewhere.”

Kat is entering something on his monitor almost before Charis finishes his sentence.

“Yen, we have Charis,” he says into his monitor. “Where are you?”

There’s a beat, then Yen’s slightly distorted voice comes through.

“Aquila West, closing in on the blackout district. Looks like we’re not going to have to fly separately after all.”

“Can you track someone?”

“…Yes,” Yen says after a beat, skepticism clear in his tone even through the tinny sound of the speaker.

“What’s her code?” Kat asks Charis.

“Let me do it.”

In answer, Kat holds out his wrist. Charis pulls up Deja’s contact card on his monitor and copies it to Kat’s.

Kat hits send. A few beats later, Yen swears.

“Fuck, I just *came from there. Who is it?”*

“My agent,” Charis answers. “Chancellor Volara’s people did something to her, she’s in trouble. She has a sim in her monitor. I can’t leave her, she was trying to help me—”

“She has a sim in her monitor.*”* Yen’s skepticism is clear. *“How is that even possible?”*

“I don’t know. We can figure that out later, she’s going to know better than any of us. Can you get her?”

Yen swears again, too quiet to discern.

“Not without help. That place is small but it’s packed with security, both live and mechanical. How quickly can you get here?”

A set of coordinates appears on all three of their monitors. He and Kat look down at the same time.

“*Varaisho,* I *cannot* believe you guys are serious,” Karra says, slowing the transport and wheeling around in the direction of Serpens Cauda.

“I just disabled the location tracker on your transport. I’ll distract as many of your tails as I can. Stay off main streets, they’ll know you just went dark.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The transport is tense and silent as Karra starts to drive them toward the location Yen sent. Kat has climbed past Charis and is leaning over the center console, projecting a map on a holoscreen so Karra can see it. His gun is in his hand.

His knife is in Charis's, and Charis runs his thumb over the flat of the blade as he tries not to let the screaming in his head come out of his mouth.

The blade is pale ceramic, the handle probably carbon fiber of some kind, given the almost woven texture to it. There's dried blood in the little grooves of the handle.

It's extremely weird and unsettling to be holding something Kat just killed people with, which Kat had given him in case *he* needs to kill anyone. He hadn't said that—he hadn't said anything, in fact, when he'd handed the Charis the folded blade a few minutes ago. But Charis has seen him kill before, and Charis understood, and he's been watching out the back and side windows of the transport as Karra drives ever since.

Somehow, no one is tailing them yet, and Charis tries not to think about what will happen to them if they're caught by busying himself trying to think of various, increasingly absurd theories about why and how Yen can distract potential tails from wherever he is. He still doesn't really know anything about Yen other than that he's the family enforcer, whatever that means. All he has to go by is that Yen has come after him twice—maybe three times, if today counts—and none were for the same reason.

They cross through Lyra and Sagitta without incident, their stolen ceremonial transport smooth and silent as it floats over the ground. The artificial sky is still dark, the sides of buildings still displaying the feed of Chancellor Volara's speech on the sides of every building until they pass under the Borealis Ring and into Sagittarius. They can't hear anything more than unintelligible, muffled speech noise from inside the transport, fainter and fainter as Karra navigates them diagonally across the district, avoiding main roads.

And then Charis spots it. A white, armored military transport with opaque windows rounds the corner they've just come around, and Charis grabs Kat's leg from behind.

"Kat," he says, voice thick with fear. "Karra. *Tail.*"

Karra's response is nearly a shout. "*What?!* It's not on any radar—"

The first bolt of plasma fire hits the roof of the transport with a *hiss.* Charis breathes a sigh of relief that the transport is treated to repel plasma fire, only to gasp as a much larger bolt strikes the back of the transport hard enough to push it violently forward, jostling all of them with the impact. Charis *smells* some of the protective coat evaporating, and, as a blueish light brightens behind them, sees a second bolt charging—

Charis catches himself with a hand as Karra banks a hard right down the first street they pass, sending the bolt of cannon fire wide and into the front of a building. The impact is a soft fizzle from inside the transport, but the collapse of the building's entryway is not.

More plasma fire, this time from guns as their tail follows them.

Karra weaves down a few streets, moving as quickly as he can. The problem with the ceremonial transport, though, is it's huge and lumbering, designed for show rather than functionality, and it's clumsy and slow as a result. The streets in this area are so tight and narrow that Karra can't cleanly steer around all of them, and he has to change course more than once before accidentally steering down an alley too narrow for the transport.

Eventually, they hit a dead end. Or, well—*not* a dead end, but a dead end for the transport.

"Out. Now. We're on foot," Karra orders, not hesitating a beat.

So they run. Karra leaves the transport running, turning the wheel as he goes so it gets stuck on a wall and blocks off the street their tail is probably coming down. Then they're weaving through Sagittarius's irregular streets, following Karra, who knows the district best, and finding shelter where they can—including inside buildings—and bolting across the more open areas where they can't. Twice, their tail nearly catches them, leaving behind broken glass and paint splatters of plasma gun and cannon fire on the stone walls of the shops and homes around them.

They're all breathing hard. Around a corner and into a narrow alley, Kat yanks Charis behind him and turns to Karra. Charis isn't even sure they're going in the right direction anymore.

"Let them catch us."

"*No,*" Charis and Karra say at the same time, and Karra meets Charis's eyes over Kat's shoulder before continuing. "These are *kill orders,* Kat—"

“I know.” Kat glances back at Charis with an expression Charis can’t read before turning forward again. “We can’t outrun them like this. We let them catch us, knock them unconscious, and take their transport with them inside it. It won’t be anomalous for a group of soldiers to be meeting up with Yen, especially not with a prisoner, and that way they’re still sending live biometrics to the mainframe. It’ll look like they’re going on purpose.”

Charis flinches at the word *prisoner*, even though he knows Kat doesn’t mean it literally, as Karra glances down Kat’s body, apparently only just now remembering that he and Kat are still wearing stolen military uniforms. Charis sees the moment Karra relents, then, nodding once. Karra looks at Charis.

“Chay, remember what I’ve shown you about throwing a punch?”

Charis rolls his eyes. “Karra, I’ve *had* fight training—”

A plasma bolt takes out the corner of the building nearest Karra, and all three of them drop down just as two more sail high, vaporizing twin craters in the wall at the end of the dead-end alley.

“How many are there?” Kat asks Karra.

Karra is closest to the mouth of the alley, and Charis watches as he taps on one of his eyes, then tips his left arm in the direction of their attackers, as close to the edge as he can without losing his cover. He draws it back in as quickly as he can, blinking his eyes back to normal.

“Six, outside. Plus one behind the wheel and probably one on the cannon.”

Kat nods, his face grim. “Those two last.”

“*Don’t* strike to kill,” Karra warns.

Charis doesn’t see Kat’s glare, but he can imagine it, considering this was his idea. “*I know.*”

The plasma cannon charges, the high-pitched whine of it practically a shriek now that they’re outside, and the three of them are out from the alley less than a second before the bolt takes out the entire corner of the building they were hiding behind, leaving a steaming, half moon-shaped crater of white stone.

Kat and Karra are already moving, and it takes all of Charis’s willpower not to freeze as one of the soldiers aims a plasma pistol at him. Charis throws open a shield from his monitor with nothing but thought, and the shield flashes white like a lightning strike as it deflects the blow. With his other hand, he flicks open Kat’s knife, sidestepping in an arc as the huge soldier tries to use Charis’s height against him—his shield makes contact first, buzzing mechanically as it impacts the soldier’s chest and sending a shockwave reverberating down Charis’s left arm.

The soldier rolls off the shield and spins on their heel, facing Charis now. They’re the same height, but the soldier is probably half again Charis’s weight. He can’t see their face at all.

Gunshots ring out. Real gunshots, and it’s apparently enough of a shock that the soldier in front of him turns. Charis brings the

edge of his shield up in a sharp arc under the soldier's helmet. The soldier stumbles forward with the blow, which is enough for Karra to come out of nowhere and deliver a spinning kick that snaps their head to one side. The soldier falls.

"Good job, Chay," Karra pants out.

Karra's lip is split, and there's a deep bruise forming on one side of his face. There are four soldiers on the ground behind them. Kat is grappling with one, and the other is—

"*Karra!!"*

The sixth soldier, smaller and faster than the one Charis had just fought, sweeps Karra's legs out from under him and drops down, clearly trying to deliver an elbow to the ribs—Charis acts without thinking, kicking them hard in the shoulder, hard enough to put them off balance as Karra grabs both their legs, sending them to the ground with an audible cough for air that reveals the soldier as female. Karra gets her in a headlock, her hands clutching uselessly at Karra's forearm.

"*Go,* Chay, help Kat—"

Charis is already moving, knife drawn as he grabs the soldier on top of Kat by the uniform collar and hauls them off in one sharp motion, destabilizing them enough that they stumble to the ground, nearly bringing Charis with them. Kat is on his feet as quickly as he can, but he's swaying a bit and has a cut that looks like it was made by a blunt object near his left eye.

Kat cocks his gun and fires at the soldier's shoulder. Then, after a beat, he rips open the transport door and shoots the driver,

too—who has not otherwise moved, almost like they'd been programmed to stay still.

He lowers the gun and looks toward Charis.

"Those aren't fatal shots, they'll just hurt like a bitch if they start moving," Kat explains as though Charis had asked.

"I was going to say, what happened to knocking them unconscious?" Karra says behind Charis.

Kat rolls his eyes. "Help me get them in and secured, we need to keep moving."

The hum of the charging plasma cannon splits the air again.

"Oh, *fuck,* one more—"

Karra and Kat hit the ground, and Charis drops to his feet, hands over his head as a shield opens instinctively. The bolt sails just high, hot and close enough though that Charis feels something like static electricity rocket down into his monitor, then the rest of him.

It takes a few seconds before he can even move again. Someone is already moving past him, ripping the last soldier down off the plasma cannon and onto the ground and firing straight through their neck, and Charis sees their firing arm lower as the fatal wound blooms open.

Karra looks at Charis, his eyes black with fury, then glances at Kat. "Save it. Let's go."

"I wasn't going to argue," Kat answers.

Charis watches Kat and Karra bind the soldiers' hands with metallic-looking ropes that remind Charis of what he'd been bound with when Tauran had kidnapped him, and he accepts a couple of ties from Kat when Kat holds them out, making for the two soldiers furthest from the transport. The three of them load the seven unconscious soldiers into the back of the transport with zero decorum, piling them on top of each other like they're sacks of grain rather than human beings.

When they're done, the three of them look at each other, then at the soldier Karra had shot.

There's a substantial pool of blood by their head, now. They're obviously dead.

"Leave her," Kat says. "It'll be more anomalous if we bring her."

At Kat's words, Charis notices the end of a blonde braid slipping down through the soldier's helmet, blood beginning to seep up through the strands. He looks away, climbing in the transport when Kat holds the door.

Again, Karra drives, Kat providing navigation as they pass out of Sagittarius South and into Serpens Cauda, his other hand firm around Charis's leg. That hand squeezes every time Charis starts to get twitchy about the pile of unconscious soldiers behind them, which is often. Their rapid healing means that they aren't going to be unconscious for long and Charis has no idea how long it's going to be before they get to Yen.

"Ow," Karra says, turning a sharp corner. That question partially answers itself as the place Yen has sent them to comes into view. It's less than a kilometer down the street they're

currently driving down—they can see it. “Kat, man, watch your elbow, I think I broke a rib—”

Charis turns to see one of the formerly-unconscious soldiers leaning over the back of Karra’s seat, clearly trying to get their bound arms around his neck.

Kat stows his holoscreen and flips around on his knees, back arced awkwardly toward the ceiling as he swings his gun and strikes the soldier grappling for Karra in the temple with the back end.

“*Fuck—”* Karra swerves, and Kat gets the soldier’s arms off Karra and shoves them back into the human pile behind them as Karra steers back on course.

By the time Yen opens the door, Kat and Charis are grappling with at least three of the soldiers, trying to keep them off Karra long enough for him to stop the transport. He rolls his eyes.

“All of you, out. Now,” Yen orders.

As soon as the three of them are out, Yen draws his plasma pistol and shoots the three who had made it upright.

“Why did you do that? We were using their biometrics.”

Kat. Yen looks at him with something like disapproval. “That would have been a great idea if their biometrics weren’t anomalous as soon as they were unconscious. How many more?”

“Four,” Karra says with a wince.

Yen nods, then goes back around the transport and opens the trunk, hauling a couple of the dead soldier's bodies out of the way and onto the ground before firing four more shots into the transport. He shuts the door on the remaining five, then walks back around and hands something to Kat. Kat's hand tightens in his for a beat.

"Use these *smartly.* I don't have more."

He releases Kat's hand, and Charis watches Kat look at the pack of real ammunition with something like relief. Yen, meanwhile, is looking at Karra with what looks like a combination of amusement and pride as he takes in his and Kat's stolen military uniforms properly, now that the soldiers are dead.

"Whose idea was *that?*"

"Mine," Karra confesses, though he's looking at Charis.

Yen laughs once, then claps Karra on the shoulder, making Karra wince. Charis can't tell whether Yen did that on purpose. "Look at you, turning into a proper criminal. Took you long enough." Before Karra can shrug him off, though, Yen turns, pulling back his hand. "Come on. Leon disabled the trip signal on this door from the ground. We have about ten minutes before it comes back on."

"Where's Vash?" Kat asks behind him.

Kat has loaded the ammunition into his pistol, pocketing the remaining rounds. Yen glances at him. "On our off-worlder. I tranquilized him with enough phenobarbital to knock him out for a few days and restrained him for good measure."

For some reason, Yen looks vaguely pleased with himself at this admission. Charis doesn't think too hard about it.

"Deja?"

Yen glances at Charis, then makes for the door, waving the rest of them through.

The building they pass into has long, dark hallways, and Charis closes his eyes and runs his fingers over his eyelids as they enter, switching his vision to night mode. Karra is in front of him, Kat behind him as Yen leads them through and down a series of stairs and hallways until the route dead-ends at a locked door.

Again, Yen looks back at them.

"This is a private holding cell. Off-books, highly classified. Once I open this, we'll have about thirty seconds before the alarm on this door re-engages. There are six guards in the hallway and two in the room where they have her, plus another two on the door on the other side who will probably come in once we start making noise. Shoot to kill."

How Yen knows all this, Charis has no idea, but his uniform has his actual name on it. There's apparently a lot Aravan didn't tell him.

Yen turns forward and disarms the door. Kat and Karra cock their guns. Once it's open, Kat shoots first, taking out the two guards nearest them—Karra takes out another, Yen two more as the door on the other side of the hall opens and, sure enough, two more guards spill in.

Only to fall practically where they stand. Charis can't even tell who shot them. Yen is making for one of many doors in this hallway with the confidence of someone who knows exactly what he's doing, until Charis turns and sees—

"Yen, *duck!*"

The remaining guard has drawn his plasma pistol, and Charis watches in slow motion as the guard shoots, missing Yen as he moves easily out of the line of fire as though he could see the gun from behind his back. The bolt strikes the second door's control panel, vaporizing it—

A gloved hand closes around Charis's shoulder. Charis doesn't have to look back to see whose hand it is. On pure instinct, he whirls on his heel, Kat's knife already open as he makes for the prison guard's neck.

It's a good hit. The knife finds its home in the guard's carotid artery, and the guard falls instantly, blood immediately pooling out from the wound. Charis isn't fully in his body when he sees Kat duck down and pull his knife free, wiping it clean on the guard's white shirt before handing it back to Charis, and he hears Karra kick in the door to the room where Deja is. He meets Kat's eyes as he accepts the knife back with a shaking hand and lets Kat close his fingers around it.

And then they're moving again. There's plasma fire that hits walls and windows before Yen and Karra each fire off a shot, dispatching the two guards in the room—one of whom had been about to fire, and the shot goes straight through where Yen had just been standing, vaporizing the other guard's arm.

He was already dead, but his plasma gun falls to the floor. Without the hand that had been holding it.

A cold spike of fear lances down Charis's neck. He blinks, and when he opens his eyes Karra has Deja in his arms and they're making for the door they'd come in through. There are more guards in the hallway when they open the door, and Kat dispatches as many of them as he has bullets in his gun before pistol-whipping another across the face, and by the time the guard staggers into the wall Yen has already shot him through with a plasma bolt.

This time, when a pair of slim, gloved hands close over Charis's hips from behind, Charis doesn't blink. He brings the hand holding the knife over his own shoulder and straight into the guard's throat.

Then the exit door slams open—from their side—and the five of them are pouring out of darkness and into the semi-darkness of the dimmed artificial sky, Kat and Yen making for the back of the transport in eerie sync before hauling the bodies of the five dead soldiers out of the back and onto the ground with the other two. Yen jumps in the back, taking their place, paying no mind to the drying blood on the floor.

"Hand her to me, the front won't hold five."

It's Kat who passes Deja's unconscious form to Yen. Karra is grimacing, a hand pressing at one side of his ribs.

"How far to the transport?"

Kat. His voice is rough.

“About two kilometers. The last quarter of that is through the blackout district.”

“So we’re on foot,” Karra says.

Yen nods. Charis climbs in next to Yen, ignoring the looks he gets from both Kat and Karra, and Yen maneuvers Deja so she’s more in Charis’s lap than his, running his fingers over her open, blank eyes to close them before clapping a thin, black band of some kind over her monitor. The band apparently has pins, because little rivulets of blood well up for a second before Deja’s rapid healing closes the wounds.

Charis’s immediate response is anger. He glares at Yen for a beat before he schools himself. Yen was the one who got them out of this. Whatever, and *whoever*, he really is to the family, he clearly knows what he’s doing.

They drive. Charis glances down at Deja. With her eyes closed, now, it just looks like she’s asleep.

It’s less than a minute before they have more tails. Charis’s gut seizes, his arms tightening around Deja until Yen once again rolls his eyes.

“Just cut your fucking losses already,” Yen says under his breath, apparently not to any of them. “Charis, shield.”

There are three of them: two ground transports and an aerial. Charis shifts a knee up to keep Deja in place and deploys a shield over himself, Yen, and Deja, presumably to block fire from the aerial, and Yen sits up holding two guns, a real pistol and a plasma pistol. He leans out one side of their transport

and fires two clean shots at the hood of the lead ground transport nearly simultaneously, starting with the real gun.

As far as Charis understands it, what happens in the next three seconds is this: the real bullet pierces through the transport's anti-plasma coating and through the hood, creating a hole that lets the plasma bolt through—vaporizing enough of the engine instantly that that transport jolts to the side and into the transport behind it with a violent, metallic *crunch.* The second is thrown into a building, and they're gone too fast for Charis to see if either transport starts moving again.

The military transport they'd stolen is much smaller and faster than the ceremonial transport they'd driven earlier. If any soldiers are following them on foot, they're too slow—Charis sees through his shield that their plasma bolts dissipate into the air before they even reach them.

That just leaves the aerial. Kat is shielding him and Karra, and Charis turns to Yen in time to see him consider something before shaking his head once, muttering to himself. Before Charis can ask, though, Yen turns to him.

"Can you carry her?"

"Yes—"

"*No,*" Kat barks from the front, not even turning around. "His wound hasn't stabilized internally."

There's a beat, then Yen openly laughs at this, as though they're not currently running for their lives from the Arkanene military. Charis blinks, his left arm bouncing a bit with the

impact of a plasma bolt. "*Right,* I forgot about that. You're alright, you know?"

Yen knocks Charis's shoulder. This smile looks proud.

It's another very long moment before Charis realizes what they're all talking about.

"Oh," he says.

Charis hasn't thought about his stab wound in what feels like a year. As soon as he does, though, he feels it again, the dull ache compounding a bit where Deja's elbow is digging into it, an ache exaggerated by the fact he has to hold his left arm aloft to keep the shield up. It isn't nearly as bad as it was, but even without diagnostics, Charis can tell his wound isn't done healing yet.

So that's what Kat meant. Charis narrows his eyes.

"*Kat,* stop *coddling* me about this, I'm fine—"

They pass under a black stone arch, and Karra stops the transport, jostling Charis and Deja as he, Kat, and Yen all climb out.

Just outside the arch, the aerial transport stops. It hovers, unable to move closer, bolts of plasma fire missing wildly through the archway until they stop coming.

They're in the blackout district. Before Charis can adjust his hold on Deja to carry her, Kat is ripping the back door all the way open with a murderous look on his face and all but hauling Deja out of his arms.

“Don’t even *think* about it,” Kat snaps. Charis holds up a hand and slides out.

And then they’re moving. It’s not hard to tell where they’re headed: Ophiuchus West Gate extends from floor to ceiling in a column in the middle of the blackout district, and Yen seems to know where he’s going as he steers them through the maze-like streets. Only once do they have to turn around.

There are footsteps behind them. Charis can’t tell how far behind. Yen pulls up his sleeve and holds his identification card face-up for the scanner.

There’s a beat. Silence, except for the footsteps.

The first airlock opens, and the five of them are through and down the sloped path to the second airlock practically before the vertical doors slide open all the way. Karra wheels around immediately, making for a box on the inside that Charis had never noticed before and entering something on it that forces the airlock doors closed. Charis hears them seal, and then they’re running again.

The second airlock opens automatically as they near it, and Charis sees the top of the transport through the gap as the doors begin to part. Relief starts to flood through him—

And then his stomach drops through his feet. Between the second airlock and the transport door is what must be an entire company of Arkanene soldiers, all of them armed with repeating plasma rifles. And Perseira, Chancellor Volara’s chief of staff, is in front of them all, an active shock baton in one hand and a plasma pistol in the other.

Her eyes are unfocused. The only eyes they can see, since the soldiers are all masked. Yen swears beside him as the second airlock closes behind them with an echoing *click.*

“Are you *fucking* kidding me—”

“Yen,” Kat interrupts in a low tone, not looking away from Perseira as he tightens his hold on Deja, eyes flicking over to the massive plasma cannon in one corner of the airlock, one that Charis doesn’t doubt is large enough to vaporize the off-worlder. Already, it’s primed to start collecting a charge. “There’s a sound grenade in my left hip pocket.”

Yen claps Kat across the back as he steps forward.

“I hate negotiating with you, but I love working with you.” Kat huffs a laugh. Yen grabs the grenade. “Everyone, ears off and closed.”

Everyone complies. Charis darts forward and turns off Kat’s—Kat looks at him with gratitude and something else, too, that Charis wishes he had more time to think about right now.

Yen pulls the pin.

Almost instantly, everyone in the airlock besides the five of them hits the ground, including the team of soldiers operating the plasma cannon. But the one on the controls must have pulled the trigger on the way down, because the huge cannon starts collecting a charge. As they make a break for the transport door, Charis sees that Perseira is bleeding out of her ears.

The door hasn't finished opening by the time they get there, and it's a few tense seconds while they wait for the ramp to drop all the way before they're all darting up it, racing the charging cannon. Yen hangs back to haul the door closed manually, throwing out a small box into the assembly of soldiers as he does.

As soon as it's closed, Yen turns his ears back on. Charis follows suit. Kat makes for the back of the transport, where Charis sees an unconscious, bound Vash strapped in one corner, and Kat quickly settles Deja onto the opposite side of the row as Yen makes for the pilot's chair. Charis immediately drops into the seat next to Deja, strapping in beside her and helping Kat get her secured.

"Everyone, get ready. That box I just dropped is an EMP. It's going to disengage the pneumatic lock by force and hopefully kill that cannon before it finishes charging."

The larger the plasma cannon, the longer it takes for it to collect a charge. That's all Charis knows. Every second that they're not moving feels like a week.

"Bind her hands," Kat says from Charis's other side, totally ignoring a glowering Karra as he straps himself in.

"Kat—"

Karra moves pointedly around the three of them and sits heavily at Deja's other side, wincing with the impact before reaching for Deja's hands and securing them with one of the metallic ties. "It's temporary," Karra says to Charis before Charis can object.

“Hold on,” Yen says. Kat’s hand closes around Charis’s knee just before the pneumatic lock pops off audibly, making the entire transport jump.

The same second, it seems, Yen guns the thrusters as hard as he can, throwing them all violently back into their seats. A beat later, a blueish light flares in the airlock windows, and a beam of light like a shooting star bursts out behind them, ripping a hole in the off-world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

For the first few minutes after their escape, it seems like no one in the transport dares to breathe.

The plasma cannon misses. Probably it hadn't had time to finish locking on their location before the EMP went off. Whatever the cause, it doesn't matter. Arkana's shields don't protest their exit—the question of why will apparently be a problem for later—and when the off-worlder's engines start breathing air again, Yen steers them home with steady hands and, to Kat's surprise, not a single snarky comment the whole way down.

Beside Kat, Charis dozes, his head tucked into the junction of Kat's neck and shoulder as Kat holds him as close as he can, ignoring Karra's scowls from two seats over until Karra falls asleep himself.

Kat can't sleep. He's never been able to sleep on transports easily anyway, and that's even more true now, what with how his brain feels the need to replay the moment Charis's face had filled the side of every tower in Central Command over and over again, as though that hadn't been one of the most singularly terrifying moments of Kat's life. Even now, with the real Charis in his arms, having disconnected him from the mainframe himself, Kat still can't quite believe he's safe.

As Charis sleeps, Kat carefully threads his arm across his shoulders, stroking his thumb across and into the dip of Charis's collarbone, his thoughts turning hazy and indefinite until the transport stops descending, then slows. Before Kat knows it, the compound's main hangar door is opening and Yen is

maneuvering the off-worlder down onto the landing pad, jostling Charis and Karra awake.

Almost as soon as the door opens, Faramorn appears, arms clasped in front of him as he glances around, eyes pausing on the unfamiliar form of Deja between him and Charis before snapping to Charis.

“Ariyen, Velcharis, Aravan wants to speak with you.”

Charis freezes in place, hand still on the buckle of the seat harness. Kat shakes his head once and snaps it open for Charis with one hand, squeezing his leg with the other.

“Go. I’ll wait for you,” he says.

And Kat knows it’s the right call, frustrating as it is to not be able to steal Charis away immediately, before Karra could beat him to it. When Aravan summons you, though, it is better to just get it over with rather than have the order hanging over your head, sucking the joy out of whatever you’re doing to avoid it. Yen nods his chin in Vash’s direction as he passes Faramorn, to which Kat responds with a nod, and Charis follows Yen, though not without one last look over his shoulder at both Kat and Karra.

Karra straightens in his seat, wincing as he unstraps himself. Kat is already on his feet, unwinding the seat harness from around Deja’s bound arms, and one glance at Karra is enough to know that the only thing Karra is going to be carrying for at *least* the rest of the day is his bruised ego, a fact confirmed when Rafel joins Faramorn in the doorway and his eyes go wide.

“Kay,” Rafel says, his voice thick with emotion.

Faramorn steps aside to let Rafel pass. Karra rolls his eyes, but he accepts Rafel's hand as he stands with another hiss of pain. "It's fine. Cracked ribs. It looks worse than it is, it'll be fine in a couple of days."

There's a long beat once Karra and Rafel lock eyes. Karra tries to free his hand, but Rafel doesn't let him have it, and the two of them have an entire nonverbal conversation in the span of about ten seconds.

"Go to medical, and *don't* argue with me," Rafel says after a beat, and Kat fights a smirk at the stern look Rafel is giving Karra. "You will see Charis when Father is done speaking with him."

Kat glances at Faramorn to see his amusement mirrored, though only in his eyes. Rafel turns to Faramorn.

"Tell Eris to follow us once my father and Leon are disconnected. I will handle lockup."

Faramorn nods, then leaves. A few beats later, after another long look from Rafel that Kat can't see, Karra deflates and follows him, muttering something under his breath that Kat can't discern even with his enhanced senses.

That leaves Kat, his brother, and the two unconscious Sacrosancts. Kat and Rafel exchange a brief look before Rafel makes for Vash, though he looks at their uncle with his hands on his hips for a long moment before exhaling a long breath through his nose and unfastening Vash's flight harness.

Kat can't blame him, he thinks as he hoists Deja into his arms again, tucking her head against his chest. Their relationship

with Vash is complicated on a good day, and Kat would wager Rafel feels similarly to Yen about his current state, that being mildly disappointed he will soon be revived out of it.

He follows his brother through the compound's lower hallways, a route that has them winding deep down into the solid rock the compound was built from, then past the bare stone into a hall of reinforced concrete. Deep underground is a room with copper-lined cement walls half a meter thick, a room also armed with basically every other kind of shield known to humanity aside from a plasma shield. There are some that block sound, some that block signals, both physical and digital firewalls—there's even a layer of shock absorption that absorbs nearly all movement from outside, and between that and the sound shield, it's nearly impossible to tell when people are coming or going from inside.

In all, in addition to being one of the most secure locations on Earth, the silence room is also as close to a physical version of the hard loop virus as they can get, and it's the safest place for Deja and Vash to be kept until they can be disconnected. The only type of data the mainframe will be able to collect from them while inside are their biometrics, as they're going to be kept in medically-induced comas until they can be disconnected from the hive without scrambling their memories to prevent the mainframe from learning anything else.

Charis hadn't been able to tell him much about Deja's situation on the flight back down before he'd fallen asleep, but what he *was* able to tell Kat is enough for Kat have been able to reason out how Deja's in-monitor sim seems to work. From what Charis told him, it sounds like her monitor is partitioned: part is the sim, part is still biometrically linked to the mainframe,

allowing her to access and communicate with the mainframe while providing a smokescreen for any activity of hers that the mainframe doesn't approve of. There's a *lot* he doesn't understand, though, and once Vash and Deja are hooked up to medical monitors, Kat isn't even remotely surprised when Rafel turns to him and orders him to send for the family doctor as well as Eris.

"Once he's done with Karra, and make sure he finishes treatment."

Rafel doesn't have to specify for Kat to know he's talking about Karra, not the doctor.

And with that, Kat leaves. He relays the necessary orders, makes a couple of quick stops, then goes to his father's office, taking up a guard against the stone wall outside.

The door is closed. Kat hasn't been invited in, and a lifetime of being Aravan Scaramandis's son has taught him enough to know not to pass his father's closed door unless he's summoned. Not that he hasn't done it on occasion when he knew he wouldn't get caught. All the same, whatever his father doesn't tell him about what they're currently discussing, Charis will.

Time blurs as Kat waits, barely moving other than to shift his weight. He's not sure how long he stands there. He can hear the sounds of their conversation, but not loud or clear enough to tell what they're talking about. Finally, though—apparently they've been around his father's card table, because the first thing Kat hears that isn't the scrambled static of the sound shield around his father's office is the sound of the heavy chairs around the table sliding back.

Kat stands up off the wall. Footsteps approach. When the door opens, Kat locks eyes with Yen for about a second, long enough for his cousin to flash him a look Kat can't read.

"He's still with your father," Yen says.

"How long?"

Kat doesn't have to clarify what he means. Yen glances inside. "Five minutes, maybe ten."

Kat nods. Yen has already left by the time Kat has resumed his post by the door.

By the time it opens again, Kat once again has no idea how long it's been. He sees Charis look around as he lets the door close, and before Charis can choose which hall to walk down, Kat has him by the wrist and is pulling him down the darkened hallway that leads to the shop floor.

"Kat, where are we going?" Charis asks after about thirty seconds.

Kat stops suddenly and tugs on Charis's wrist, catching Charis before he stumbles and crowding him into the wall behind him.

"Kat?!"

"Baby," Kat says on a breath, then kisses him.

Charis's lips feel like home, soft and full and still a little bitten from where he'd kept chewing on it during their escape, and *fuck,* Kat feels their bodies align when he holds Charis's face still, slides a hand into his curls, and slots their hips together, pressing into him until Charis hits the wall. Charis holds his

arms for balance as Kat keeps kissing him, once, twice, again, more and more insistent until *finally* Charis melts into him and throws his arms around Kat's neck, opens his mouth when Kat licks across the seam of his lips, and he's here.

He's *here.* He's *his*, finally. No one else is trying to keep Charis from him. He drops one arm down and around Charis's back, bowing Charis's body into his as a surge of wild possessiveness seizes him, and Kat hears himself make a noise against Charis's mouth as Charis's hips roll into his. That feeling doubles in ferocity when Charis moans softly as Kat tugs gently at his lower lip with his teeth, and that's it, Kat is going to spend the rest of the night making Charis make that exact sound—

"Kat," Charis says.

Now it's Kat who moans against Charis's lips as he grinds into Charis, his intentions clear as day.

"*Kat,*" Charis manages, sounding more like he actually wants to say something.

Out of *courtesy,* but also because Charis's rapid healing means his neck no longer bears the marks Kat had put there last night, which is unacceptable, Kat licks up Charis's neck to where he wants his first mark to go.

"Not here," Charis says on a sigh, though he's unable to stop himself from rolling his hips into Kat's again as Kat sucks and bites a mark onto his neck that will bruise beautifully, at least for a couple of hours.

"Why not? I want you right now," Kat murmurs against Charis's skin.

Charis's next words come out on a gasp.

"Because I want to be in a bed when you fuck me."

Kat nearly growls. He grabs Charis's wrist again and pulls him further down the hall.

Kat's room isn't where the others are. It's on the other side of his garage, the side of the compound buried deep in the rock, and it doesn't have automatic doors. Quickly, though not quickly enough, Kat unlocks it and tugs Charis inside and re-locks the door behind them. He throws his keys on the long counter beside the door, and when he turns to face Charis again Charis has his fingers at the fastening of his jeans—

"Let me," Kat says, taking Charis's hands in his.

Charis nods, smiling a bit. "Yeah. Okay."

With one last squeeze, Kat nudges Charis's hands away and his arms up as he tugs Charis's shirt off, tossing it away before dropping his hands to the backs of his thighs. Charis gets the clue, jumping up and latching on, kissing Kat deeply as Kat walks them back to his bed. Not as big as Charis's, Charis's is basically a continent, but more than enough to do everything he plans to do to Charis tonight.

Kat sets him on the edge and Charis lets go, leaning back on his hands and looking up at Kat, pupils blown and chest heaving with his breath. He's flushed pink below the collarbone and on his cheeks, his lips already red and a bit swollen.

Like this, it's easy to see why Charis is one of the biggest celebrities on both worlds. He has huge, expressive eyes that

seem to reveal everything he's feeling, making him look younger than he is. But his body is a man's body, long and lithe and athletic, his face mostly devoid of the softness of adolescence, and below the empathy and the mischief in his eyes is wisdom far beyond his years and the best heart Kat has ever known.

He's a vision.

Kat steps between Charis's legs and pulls off his own shirt, tossing it away. He rests his knees against the edge of the mattress, holding Charis by the shoulders.

"Are you gonna make me beg?" Charis asks.

Slowly, Kat sinks to his knees on the floor, pulling Charis closer and running a hand up his bare torso, holding Charis's gaze until his hand stops over Charis's wound. He runs his thumb beneath it, making Charis's muscles twitch.

It's close. It's very close to being healed enough that there's no longer a risk of internal bleeding. After today, though, no margin of error is acceptable to Kat. He is not taking *any* chances.

He lowers his hand, then runs it back up the inside of Charis's leg. The jeans he's wearing have lace panels in the sides and are cut low enough that half his hipbones are visible, so tight to his thighs that the denim doesn't gather under his hand. Any other time, he would appreciate them.

"Oh Angel, we still have forty-seven minutes before I can have my way with you," he says, looking up at Charis again as he digs his thumb gently into the apex of Charis's thigh, then up the

line of his groin. Charis's breath catches. "Do you have any idea how much you scared me today? Of *course* I'm going to make you beg."

Charis makes a noise that's almost like a squeak as Kat grabs around his ass and pulls him even closer, dipping his fingers under Charis's low waistband. He licks along the line of skin just above, then runs his teeth across Charis's prominent hipbone, not quite biting down yet.

"And don't even think about being quiet. No one can hear us."

Charis's voice is breathy when he responds. "I'm not that loud in bed—"

We'll see about that, Kat thinks. He runs his tongue slowly up the inside of Charis's hip, savoring the taste and slightly sweet smell of his skin, then dips his head and sucks a savage mark into the highest part of the bone, one Charis will feel for the rest of the night.

"*Ah—*"

Kat smiles. That's not loud enough, but they have time. He licks and then kisses the mark he's just left, then pulls back, watching in satisfaction as it starts to bloom red and purple almost immediately.

He feels Charis watching him. Charis's stare is loud as Kat surveys his skin, deciding where to mark next. The answer is *everywhere,* but unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—he only has one mouth, so he's limited to one at a time.

As he ponders this, Kat unfastens Charis's jeans one-handed, already dipping inside, but then his fingers catch on something and he pulls his hand back as though it's been burned. When he looks up at Charis, Charis is smirking.

"I told you I'd wear one you could play with."

For a second, the only thing Kat hears in his mind is static, and he isn't quite able to keep the incredulity off his face.

He wore this to a *job*—?

Kat blinks.

"What *exactly* were you expecting would happen today, Charis?"

Charis shrugs one shoulder. He's still smirking a bit. "I knew you'd get me. And anyway, lately whenever you're overwhelmed, you jump me, so I figured why not be prepared—"

Kat is on Charis before he finishes that sentence, not caring that he's proving him right. He stands up enough to snatch a pillow for under Charis's back, and Charis catches his drift, scooting back against it on his elbows. Kat chases him and lays him out all the way, still mindful of his wound.

And then Charis is under Kat, totally prone, and the *look* he's giving Kat—dark, heady, but *so* trusting—something feral rears up inside Kat and growls in satisfaction at seeing Charis laid out like this for him, *by* him, bearing his marks and looking up at Kat like he wants—

“Tell me what you want, Angel,” Kat says as he kneels between Charis’s legs again, this time on the bed, running his hands up the planes of his stomach, then grazing a thumb along the side of the bars on his chest. Charis’s skin is already hot under his touch.

“Take these off,” Charis says, thumbing at Kat’s waistband before his look turns sly. “They’re—mine anyway—”

Charis’s breath hitches at the end of that sentence as Kat bends down and licks along the shell of his ear before nipping just below, leaving another mark on the sensitive skin of his neck near the one he’d left in the hall. “No dodging the question.”

Charis shudders. Whether at the sound of Kat’s voice so close or at the feel of Kat’s tongue over the tendon where he intends to mark next—*fuck,* he is so responsive it’s making Kat almost *giddy*. “You didn’t specify—”

When Kat bites down next, Charis arcs up into him with a whine, baring his neck even more. Kat bands an arm across Charis’s back and Charis throws one over Kat’s shoulder, wrapping around his neck and into his hair, his nails raking against Kat’s scalp.

“*Yes,*” he sighs out as Kat tracks his other hand down across his body, then under his thigh, hitching Charis’s leg over his own hip as he leaves butterfly kisses down Charis’s throat before sinking his teeth in again, this time licking against Charis as he sucks yet another mark into his neck. “Babe, *yes*—”

It’s Kat who shivers this time as he catches Charis’s mouth in a filthy kiss, nipping his lip on purpose, his tongue catching Charis’s words before they can get out. Before long, the only

sounds he's making are these needy little mewls, and Kat is collecting them. He wants more. He wants all of them.

Charis's other arm winds around Kat's neck as he bows his whole body into Kat's, chasing friction, pressure, anything, and even through three layers—or maybe more like two, Kat still doesn't know yet—Charis is grinding against the apex of Kat's thigh, already rolling his hips.

Kat stills him with both hands, moving so he's kneeling between Charis's legs again. His jeans are still unfastened so Kat just feels under the band and tugs them down over his ass, careful to leave whatever is beneath—

"*Ik raban varaisho,*" Kat swears in Arkane. It comes out a snarl and when he hears Charis laughing, Kat looks back up to find Charis up on his elbows again, smiling at the stone ceiling.

"Ah, you're fun to tease," Charis manages.

For a solid few seconds, Kat just stares. The *picture* Charis makes right now—bruised and marked all along his neck and hip, beautifully flushed, the thin platinum chain he always wears around his neck askew, jeans halfway down thighs that are still half-straddling Kat's—the remnants of eye makeup that survived their escape draw out the warmth in his dark eyes when Charis looks at him again, his smile turning sly.

"Well? What do you think?"

What does he *think*—

The thing Charis is wearing barely qualifies as underwear. It has a lot of straps in a kind of net shape that stretch slightly when

Kat tugs on them with a fingertip, the web separated from the rest by a narrow strip of lace in the same pattern as the lace panels on Charis's white jeans.

But it's blue.

It's deep, midnight blue, dark enough that it almost looks black in the low light of Kat's room. What little of it is fabric has a slight sheen.

The shutters in Kat's eyes snap before he even realizes what's happening.

"Did you just take a picture?" Charis asks with a grin that Kat hears more than sees.

"Yes," he answers.

Charis snorts. "Well keep *that* to yourself, if anyone ever sees me wearing anything other than white I'll never hear the end of it—"

Kat practically rips Charis's jeans off the rest of the way, tossing them across the room, and he has Charis under him again by the time he hears them hit the stone wall and drop down to the floor, palming roughly at Charis's bare ass.

"*No one,*" Kat says, voice rough and low and bearing up with his fingers hard enough to bruise, "sees you like this, *but me.*"

"*Mmm,* so I should cancel the lingerie ad shoot I had booked for next week—?"

It's obvious Charis isn't being serious in context of the day's events, but he plays Charis's game anyway, licking across one of

Charis's chest scars before tugging at it with his teeth and drawing a lovely sound out of Charis that's somewhere between a yelp and a whine.

"Did I stutter?"

Charis huffs a laugh, but it quickly turns into that whimper again when Kat resumes his attack on Charis's chest, licking and nipping below the scar until there's a parallel red track below it, his thumb skating over the other. Before long, Charis's fingers ghost over the scab from where one of the soldiers had hit him with a ringed hand hard enough to break skin, gentle as a breeze. He can barely even feel the bruise.

Kat knows, in his head, that he has probably been a little in love with Charis since he saw him scale the rock wall in the gorge the first time he'd taken Charis to see the smoke. But this—Charis is in *his* bed, nearly naked, wrapped up like a gift for Kat, and all of a sudden all of the fear Kat has felt almost since he woke up this morning is loud and visceral and *screaming* its relief that Charis is here, he's okay, he's *alive*—

Kat feels Charis's hand in his hair before he even registers Charis's movement. Charis is straddling him on his knees now, tipping Kat's face up and kissing him gently, but deeply, his other hand tracking up Kat's chest until it's resting around Kat's throat. Kat tastes salt.

"I'm here," Charis nearly whispers, close enough that Kat can feel Charis's breath against his lips, his smile beatific. He runs his thumb across Kat's lips. "I'm here. It's okay. You weren't too late."

How does he do this? How does he always know? Barely a month and already Charis knows what Kat is thinking better than he does. Without breaking eye contact, Charis wipes away his tears as Kat looks at him in awe.

“What are you,” he says.

“Hm.” Charis glances away in mock consideration, pretending to frown a bit. “Tired. Horny.” He looks back at Kat, smiles, and raises his hand to the back of Kat’s neck. “Yours.”

Kat pulls him back in and kisses him.

There’s no hurry, Kat reminds himself as he runs his hand up Charis’s bare back, pressing Charis into his chest. There’s no hurry. They’re safe. They’re *truly* invisible to the mainframe now, given Eris’s hard loop virus, and no one at the compound is going to come here. Everyone knows better.

Which doesn’t foreclose on the possibility that there’s a contingent of Arkanene soldiers currently en route to the compound, since the mainframe knows where it is, but—

“Hey. Come back to me,” Charis says.

One of Charis’s thumbs is ghosting against his temple. Kat catches that hand, bringing it to his lips. “Don’t leave me again.”

Charis smiles. “Deal. Though that means you’ll have to come with me everywhere.”

“Twist my arm,” Kat says.

Charis tips his head, conspiratorial now. “You might also be a fugitive.”

Kat rolls his eyes. “Angel, I think I was born a fugitive.”

Charis laughs softly. This time, they pull each other back in, and it’s Charis’s tongue that slips into Kat’s mouth as he takes a breath. Charis drops his hands to Kat’s sides, though one is quickly up and around Kat’s back and he makes a *mmmm* of satisfaction as he tracks over Kat’s scars that vibrates against Kat’s lips, making him smile into the kiss.

Charis’s other hand makes for the tie of the cargo pants Kat had taken from Charis’s closet that morning, pulling the knot free. “Your turn. Off.”

Emphasizing the order, Charis sits back on his heels so Kat can slide out from under him.

Kat gets off the bed and stands with dripping reluctance, holding Charis’s gaze as he slides Charis’s borrowed pants down his own hips and over his ass, letting them drop to the floor before kicking them away, then kneeling in front of Charis again. He’s still most of the way hard, despite the emotion he’s experiencing, and Charis is looking at his dick like he wants to eat it.

Charis huffs something out in Arkane that’s too slurred to catch, then tries again in the common language. “I fucking knew it. This absolutely seals the deal on you being my soulmate.”

Kat laughs softly as he runs his thumb in slow circles, gathering the precome that’s starting to collect as Charis watches, semi-

mesmerized. “That’s good, because I have no intention of letting you go.”

Charis launches himself at Kat, hard enough that Kat has to catch himself on a hand to keep them both from toppling over, slinging both arms around Kat’s neck and kissing him with what can only be described as sudden desperation. Kat holds him around the back, letting this happen for a moment before pulling back, stopping Charis with a hand on his chest.

“No, come back,” Charis whines.

“In a minute. Let me see.”

Kat doesn’t have to explain what he means. Charis unhooks his arms and sits back on his hands, letting Kat get a good view of his front.

As he has many times in the last few days, Kat traces the outline of Charis’s wound. It’s no longer scabbed, the skin beneath pink and tender, the edges of the scar slightly raised. They probably always will be. But even with the new, viscerally personal knowledge of what a monitor can encourage the body to do, it has yet to stop surprising Kat how fast Charis has healed.

“How much longer?” Charis asks.

Kat runs his palm across it. “About half an hour.”

“*Kaaaat.* That’s close enough,” Charis whines again, letting his head drop back. But he folds when Kat pushes gently on his chest, moving back against the pillows as Kat follows him down.

“No chances,” Kat answers, licking along the underside of Charis’s collarbone. Kat has yet to mark him there today and that needs to change. Already, though, Charis is writhing against him skin to skin and Kat is finding it *very* hard to concentrate.

“You said you were gonna make me beg, I’m begging,” Charis protests, throwing his arms around Kat’s neck again as though Kat had any intention of going anywhere. “*Please,* Kat, at least touch me—”

“As you wish,” Kat says, dropping his voice.

Charis arcs back with a gasp as Kat runs a hand down over the fabric of the thong.

“Just—s-so you know, you don’t have to take this off to fuck me,” Charis says.

Kat slides a hand under Charis’s ass, then up, looking for the band. When he finds it, he traces it, first halfway across, then down.

Charis isn’t kidding. The whole band is lace, both parts of it, and Kat is kind of amazed it’s intact at all after their escape. He rolls it around his fingertip.

“In that case, I hope you weren’t planning on wearing this again.”

Charis lifts his head enough to look Kat in the eyes, his own full of mischief again. “I’d like to see you try to break it. This lace can withstand 3,000 pounds of lateral force.”

Kat tries not to dwell on the question of why Charis's lingerie has that much tensile strength, though the sudden thought of Charis on one of his bikes in this and one of his leather jackets and nothing else makes itself known with a sudden hot spike of desire.

Kat rolls the band around his finger again. There's probably no harm in opening him up now. He'll just have to keep Charis still.

After a beat or two of consideration, Kat sits up on his knees enough to lean over Charis and grab the vial off his nightstand that he'd stolen from Yen's multipurpose dungeon while Charis had been meeting with Aravan. Or, well—*stolen* is probably not the operative word. Petra had already been in there, already half-undressed and fastening up a harness of some kind that was far more than Kat wanted to know about Petra's sex life with Yen, and Petra had given it to Kat with a knowing look.

Except before Kat's hand fully closes around it, Charis's hand is around Kat and it's *his* thumb circling around the tip and Kat takes a sharp breath. Charis is still smirking.

"You're not gonna need that," he says. "Drop your hand a little lower."

He meets Charis's eyes. Charis's words were a dare, almost an order, and it's the sexiest thing Kat has ever heard. But Kat has no words right now, so in response he braces one hand on Charis's thigh and slides the other between his legs, moving he lower band of the thong out of the way as he goes.

He draws his finger in and out, stroking slowly into Charis's heat and drawing little breathless gasps out of Charis as he does. When he bands an arm under Charis's back and shifts his own

weight forward, adding a second finger, Charis sighs into him, his hand tightening around Kat's wrist as he encourages Kat's hand deeper. And Kat lets him, letting Charis fuck himself on his hand for a few moments before crooking his fingers and pressing up and in, making Charis keen into the touch.

Charis makes another sound Kat can't describe, high and pleading, his grip on Kat's wrist tightening briefly before going slack, replaced by a leg Charis bands around behind Kat's thigh to try to keep him in place as Charis's hips start making these little aborted movements, trying to get Kat's hand deeper still. Before long, Kat can *hear* what he's doing to Charis.

It's dizzying. Kat had spent the hour or so that Charis had been triaging with his father thinking in increasingly vivid detail about everything he would do to Charis once he was out. A few of those plans remain, but many better ideas have occurred to him as he's watched Charis unravel under just his hands.

Kat pulls out slowly one last time, sitting up on his knees, answering Charis's question.

"I *think* that I'm obsessed with you."

Charis is still holding Kat's wrist. His hand is just barely trembling around it. Kat locks his arms under Charis's thighs, spreading his legs a bit more, then leans down and licks across his entrance. Charis makes that noise again and Kat tastes his wetness on his tongue.

As though he needed any more encouragement. He throws Charis's legs over his shoulders and tips his ass forward and dives back in.

Kat knows he has a long tongue, and he takes advantage. He licks his way inside Charis's core like he would his mouth, savoring Charis's whines above him, and by the time he's practically fucking Charis on his tongue, Charis is gasping and writhing above him and Kat spreads him open a little further, licks a little deeper, until Charis's whines turn to cries and *finally*, Kat can hear his voice.

He says something in Arkane that Kat can't quite make out even with his enhanced hearing, then something he very much can.

"*Kat*—please, I'm ready," he manages, his fingertips clutching uselessly at the sheets beside him. "*Please,* I want you inside—"

Kat sits up and wipes his mouth off on the back of his hand, holding Charis's stare as he licks it clean.

Charis's eyes flash even darker. The flush that's spread over his chest and face deepens, the same color as his bitten lips.

"I've been inside, Angel," Kat says, playing the game.

Charis practically keens in desperation, clenching around nothing, and starts reaching for himself—Kat catches that hand before he can even get close.

"Ah, no, none of that."

"*Sha—ssal,"* Charis mutters through his teeth. Kat smirks, running his thumb over the back of Charis's hand.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

As though in response, Charis tries to pull his hand back. Kat doesn't let him.

"If you're not going to fuck me, I'll do it myself—"

Oh, this is fun. He's responsive in *every* way. "From there? That's a neat trick," Kat teases again.

Charis's legs are still over his shoulders, and at Charis's responding glare, Kat lets him maneuver them off. "Don't think I won't."

"I didn't know you were this much of a brat."

"Yes you did, you've known since the warehouse," Charis fires back instantly, turning his hand over in Kat's and squeezing.

Kat takes the hint this time. He pulls Charis up and toward him until Charis raises himself up onto his knees and leans forward, bracing on one hand while Kat guides the other over his shoulder. Then he's bracketing Kat's thighs in his, and he's planted both hands on Kat's shoulders as he rolls his hips and positions himself at the tip of Kat's cock.

Kat looks up at Charis, and he feels more than hears Charis inhale sharply as he sinks down around him.

Immediately Kat's head swims. His hands find the underside of Charis's thighs, trying with the tiny sliver of brain that's still online to slow Charis's descent to keep him from hurting himself, but just as quickly Charis's hands are on each of his own cheeks and he's spreading himself further, whining against the stretch and the depth in a way that resonates *deeply* with the possessive thing inside Kat.

Kat can't breathe. It's so much. Charis is *so* tight around him. He catches Charis around the back, pulling him into his chest, only remembering belatedly to bring a hand to Charis's wound as Charis bears down on him, taking Kat as deep as he can.

For a long time, they just stay there, Kat anchoring Charis to his chest as Charis's body accepts him, trembling a little bit with the effort. But Charis is holding him just as tightly, *everywhere,* and one hand is in Kat's hair, the other at his side now as Charis takes sharp breaths above him that smooth out slowly as Charis begins to relax, then melts into Kat almost all at once, burying his face in Kat's hair.

"Chay," Kat breathes out as he gathers Charis to him, one hand sliding up his back again, unable to help himself. "Angel. I love you."

How long have they been here? Kat is not in his body anymore. He's floating off toward some astral plane, but Charis is keeping him tethered to this world. The sound Charis makes might be a laugh, or it might be a sob. Whatever it is, the next moment, Charis is squeezing his legs around Kat's hips and thighs, making himself clench over Kat as he throws his arms around Kat's neck again and ducks down, kissing him frantically and trying to speak through it.

"Ah—*ha*, Kat—babe, I didn't want to scare you—*koaramat*, I love you—"

It's Kat who draws a sharp breath at this. It's shaking a bit as Kat lets it out, drawing his other hand up Charis's back and holding his head still, fighting his own instincts to throw Charis down and rut into him until he screams. Instead, Kat blinks and somehow has gently laid Charis out over his pillows again

without separating them, tracing the cut of the thong Charis is still wearing.

"*Chadi ik raban kou milaya*," Kat says in wonder. "How did I get you?"

Charis laughs. "Well, this one time you called your scary cousin and his thugs on me in the Boneyard—"

Kat dips back down and kisses Charis, this time licking into his mouth, letting him taste himself on Kat's tongue. He would never stop being grateful *that* they met, but the *way* they met is among the only things Kat regrets.

"I don't deserve you."

Charis pulls him back down. "It's not about deserving, Kat. I chose you." Charis smiles, then, one that promises more mischief. "Will you please fuck me up now?"

Kat meets Charis with a look that's as much a promise as a dare. He holds Charis's gaze as he pulls almost all the way out, achingly slow, relishing the nearly frictionless heat down his cock before sinking back in, savoring the feel of the way Charis's body is opening to accommodate him.

Again, he runs a hand up Charis's front. There are three minutes left before the risk of Charis's wound reopening finally becomes zero.

He can wait that long.

Kat raises himself up onto his elbows and rolls his hips, pulling out and pushing back in in long arcs that rake slowly against

Charis's walls, reaching down and running his thumb across Charis's groin beneath where they're joined. It's not long at all before Charis is whimpering beneath him, incoherent and nearly crying as he hooks his ankles across Kat's back and digs in his heels, trying to hold Kat deeper still. And maybe Charis knows just as well as Kat when the timer hits zero, because the *second* it does, Charis breaks off and pushes Kat so he's on his back and climbs back onto him, lining Kat up and sinking back with a satisfied gasp and a smile that will be burned on the inside of Kat's retinas forever.

"*Seyu shassal,"* Charis says on a breath.

He really does have the cutest off-worlder accent in Arkane, even when he's calling Kat a demon.

It's the possessive pronoun in front of it that makes Kat's heart stutter.

Mine.

Kat buries a hand in Charis's curls, pulling him down for a kiss.

In the end, it's Charis who rides Kat like he's possessed, enough that he has to break away from Kat's mouth to breathe, and the sound is obscene in Kat's room. The walls are stone, and the slick sound of Charis using him like this echoes and rebounds around them with nothing to catch it. Charis tips his head back and he's gasping and moaning with every roll of his hips, greedy for Kat, ready to take everything he can—

Kat snaps his hips and grinds deep into Charis, driving himself even further inside. And when he holds Charis's hips in place and does it again, Charis grins and wraps a hand around Kat's

back, tugging him back over and on top of him. Kat lets Charis maneuver him, then angles Charis's hips up toward him, tracking his other hand up Charis's exquisite body, over the marks on his collarbone and neck and up into his hair.

Once more, Kat leans down to kiss him. But this time he doesn't linger. Instead, Kat tugs the pillow under Charis's hips so his back is arched over it and sinks back in with no warning, hands around Charis's waist, only to pull back and snap in hard enough to punch the breath out of Charis's lungs.

"It's about time," Charis huffs.

That sounds like a challenge. Kat drops his hands and picks Charis up from under his thighs and buries himself inside. Once, then again, and again—

When he gets that Kat isn't going to stop, Charis's hands scramble briefly for Kat's wrists before he gives up and reaches over his head, winding Kat's sheets around his hands a couple of times as he hooks his legs over Kat's.

"Harder," he gasps. "*Kat—"*

"*Gavril,*" he all but whispers in Charis's ear. Angel. And it seems like Charis nods once, but what Kat feels more is Charis's hand reaching back and behind Kat's neck, moaning up and almost into Kat's skin. Charis's toes curl and dig into the blanket as his head drops to Kat's shoulder, and Kat holds him there until he goes boneless again and whimpers his name.

"Louder, baby, let me hear you," Kat says.

The next sound *is* louder, with actual voice in it that breaks at the end. Charis moans and writhes against him. That same primal, possessive thing in him smiles.

"Mmmmm*mmm*—"

Kat tightens his grip. Charis twitches against him, his body coiling tight.

"Kat, I'm really close—I've *been* really close—!"

A couple more thrusts, then Kat nestles his cheek in Charis's hair. With Charis right up against him like this, Kat can smell the sex radiating off of both of them, musty and vaguely sweet as he keeps his rhythm, drawing periodic sounds from him that are music to Kat's ears. Kat breathes deeply as he works Charis, envelopes himself in Charis's scent and sound, *feels* when Charis finally reaches the edge.

"Come for me, Angel."

And he does. Just like that. Charis cries out as he comes, high and long, covering Kat's hand as Kat strokes him through it, stopping before Charis hits oversensitivity and opening his arms when Charis curls into him, trembling with his own aftershocks as Kat brings one arm around him.

Now that he no longer has to be careful, Kat gives it to him. As he starts pounding into Charis, Charis keens into it, digging his shoulders into the mattress, arcing up into Kat's hands until Kat drops one to his hip and tightens his grip hard enough to bruise, and somehow Charis is both wincing and smiling but he's also whining, gasping, writhing under Kat as he starts to go boneless—

Kat's orgasm hits him suddenly, with no warning, and it's Kat who nearly shouts as he spills into Charis, shoving his arm beneath and touching his forehead to Charis's chest as wave after wave of white-hot pleasure rips through him like lightning. His body *sings* with it, even as he shudders and shakes against Charis for what feels like an eternity, Charis's leaking cock making a mess of his skin and fuck, *fuck*, Kat has never been this happy. He might even be laughing.

As his aftershocks start to slow, Kat becomes aware of how tight he'd been gripping Charis, hard enough that there are finger-shaped bruises welling up above both hips, now, not just one. But Charis is smiling, softer now, and just as Charis's hand starts carding through his hair, Kat flips over, pulls down the thong, and moves back against the headboard, ignoring Charis's whine of protest when he pulls out.

With Charis's incredibly long eyelashes, Kat feels it when Charis's eyes blink open again.

"I love you," he says, then yawns, hard enough that his jaw cracks a bit. "And I'm sleepy."

Kat runs his thumb across Charis's jawline. "Sleep, baby. I've got you."

Charis nods. "You too."

Before long, Kat is running his thumb in slow, gentle circles against Charis's skin. "I will. I want to hold you like this for a while first."

Charis nods again, then stills, and it's only a few minutes before he drifts off in Kat's arms.

This, Kat thinks. This is everything he'd never known he wanted. What he would go to war for over and over again without even batting an eye. Whatever the mainframe wants Charis for, it doesn't want him as much as Kat does. He will fight with everything he has to protect this.

"*Fiadan,*" He says, dropping a kiss to Charis's hair, sleep closing in on him as well. "*Yabari.*"

Good. Perfect.

He sleeps.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It's long into the early hours of the dawn before the dust from the mission settles.

The woman Velcharis had insisted on rescuing was an addition to the plan he had not foreseen, but a happy accident, if indeed it's true that she hosts a simulacrum inside her monitor. That is a feat that has long been dreamt of but never executed, owing mostly to the difficulties inherent in separating out enough of a person's consciousness from a monitor's neural interface to preserve the freedoms of disconnection without losing access to the mainframe's vast resources.

The necessary minds are already at work on the problem of how to disconnect and revive her without scrambling her memory. When she wakes, she will explain her simulacrum's functionality to Eris and her political connections to Rafel and Faramorn, and by then it won't be a problem that they've brought an active member of the Gaia Movement to the compound. In fact, Deja might prove very helpful to them.

Aravan smiles at the thought of the myriad benefits Velcharis's unintentional foresight have brought to their doorstep as he moves his bishop across his holographic chessboard, intercepting Faramorn's rook. He takes a pull from his cigar and lets it out slowly as Faramorn considers his next move.

Aside from Deja, the only other hitch in the plan had been that Yen's deviation from his instructions cost them his brother's personal off-world transport, a fact noted on the mission report Faramorn had compiled for him. The report is still open on the notescreen on Faramorn's side of the table.

Aravan appreciates Faramorn's thoroughness. He always has. In the grand scheme, however, Deja will be far more beneficial than a vehicle that is easily replaced, particularly now that they have unmitigated access to the Lyricus-Mensara family resources.

It is poetic, in many ways, how things have come full circle since Aravan shot Mensiria and Lyrian on Arianus Bridge.

Killing his foster sister had never been Aravan's desire. Mensiria knew about Arkana's terraforming activities because he himself had known about them, both the extent of the destruction and why it was occurring. That a ship the size of Arkana requires astronomical quantities of rare Earth materials to keep itself running has always been obvious to anyone willing to ask the question. But it had been Mensiria who had worked out that Arkana's increasing destructiveness was due to its own impending death, and she had influenced Lyrian to become critical of the class system as a means of working against the mainframe. They viewed bringing the population of Arkana back to Earth as the only solution.

In the end, her idealism was dangerous. The Gaia Movement, the more militant manifestation of her ideals that has arisen in the wake of her and Lyrian's death, is testament to that. In her unrelenting optimism, what Mensiria failed to realize was that bringing the Sacrosanct back to the ground would lead to war, as the Sacrosanct, who do not know how to live without abundance, proceeded to bankrupt an already-depleted Earth of its resources as their forefathers had. It was simply a different collective death than Arkana's self-exhaustion would bring about, one likely to result in far more suffering on a far vaster scale as class warfare erupted over the entire planet.

But it is easier to change one mind than to change millions—at least, if your primary tool is ordinary human persuasion.

And Arkana is no human.

Faramorn has backed himself into a corner with his current gambit, and they both know it. They also both know that Aravan has no intention of sparing him. Today, however, there is an alternative move Aravan can make that will bring Faramorn out of immediate danger of losing his queen, but which will, assuming Faramorn does in fact make the next two moves Aravan anticipates he will, give Aravan checkmate in the same number of moves. He moves a pawn according to the latter, one that will reach promotion on his second move.

Arkana's danger has always taken the form of its singular prime directive to keep those it recognizes as human alive. Aravan had once had the vision of expanding the mainframe's protection by replicating the blood tag that marks the Sacrosanct so it became dominant rather than recessive, but that solution quickly revealed itself as too slow as it became more and more obvious how impending Arkana's self-exhaustion truly was.

So when Velcharis had come to him and asked how to change the prime directive, Aravan knew his work was done.

Unbeknownst to anyone but Eris, Aravan has already loaded an Obedience Protocol of sorts into his monitor that will do just that. He does not have to go off-world to use it, either—he simply needs to reconnect to the mainframe, a process as straightforward as re-activating his inert blood tag. And *that,* in turn, was as simple as reverse engineering the hard loop virus Eris had designed collaboratively with Aguilanos, their family

doctor—one which blocked any and all inquiries from the mainframe about its host, regardless of where they were directed.

A virus which had, after all, been derived from Aravan's own blood.

But while Aravan's inert blood tag prevents him from being able to use his monitor—his inert blood tag means the mainframe reads him as dead, and neither the mainframe nor his own enhanced biometrics respond to commands from the dead—Aravan has been passively receiving information from the mainframe for years. Until Velcharis's arrival that morning, Aravan had been the only one at the compound who had received the message in that long-dead language signifying the commencement of the Collection. The timeline had been moved forward about twenty years, of course, and Aravan's own brother had already been gone by the time he had Yen look in on him. And Velcharis had received the message too, despite the fact he does not have the blood.

Velcharis's active Obedience Protocol meant he could not resist the mainframe's orders. He *could*, however, provide a smokescreen that would give the mainframe something to look at while the rest of them reversed a course that would all but stop the Earth in its orbit before the end of Aravan's natural life.

This solution puts an end to everything Aravan has ever worried about. The Earth has more resources than Arkana can mine, but Arkana's activity has been terraforming the Earth at a rate that is not sustainable, speeding up climate change and desertifying most of the planet. And if Arkana didn't cook the planet alive

when it eventually fell to ground, its demise would be more than enough to kill almost all remaining life on Earth.

And if the Sacrosanct, once freed from Arkana, are no longer primarily concerned with their own survival, then they could make substantial strides toward reversing the course their collective greed had begun over a millennium ago.

He and Faramorn exchange a few moves in silence, Aravan smiling as he alternates between his catha cigar and the whiskey he had decanted that morning. This particular spirit had been bottled from a cask found in a fortified underground bunker on the other side of the world before the onset of the third nuclear winter. It spent just shy of a century in that cask, then another near-century in a bottle before Aravan himself had acquired it, a legacy passed down from his great-grandfather.

There is nothing like it in the world. There never will be again. Likely it will be Rafel who finishes it, as Rafel is his only son who shares his palate.

In the end, Aravan finishes his cigar at almost the exact time that Faramorn makes the move that will cost him the game, a fact he realizes with a soft hiss of disappointment almost immediately after his fingers leave his piece. Aravan moves his piece anyway, then looks up at his right hand and smiles.

“Checkmate.”

After a beat, Aravan stands and extends his hand over the board. Faramorn takes it, though not without a brief look of question as to why Aravan is suddenly offering such a gesture, a question Aravan does not answer to as he takes his glass and

walks out of his study, leaving Faramorn there to study the board.

At this hour, the rest of the compound is asleep, save the handful of guards whose job it is to keep watch in the event Arkana retaliates over its loss at the Collection. Mako is among those on this watch, and Aravan nods at him as he passes through the hangar and out the compound's emergency exit, still holding his glass.

There is a staircase outside this door, one cut into the rock itself, easily missed when coming and going from the compound by air. As Aravan climbs it, the first light of dawn is just beginning to stretch across the plateau.

It's a cloudless morning, and the wind is soft and warm as Aravan watches the sun rise over sands that were once the bottom of the ocean floor. He sets his empty glass at his feet as the first golden thread of sun blinks over the horizon.

Then he pulls up his sleeve.

No one else truly knows what Aravan is about to do. Eris has strong suspicions, but Aravan had never told her how the protocol she developed that will reverse the prime directive truly works. Instead of taking care of the Sacrosanct, Arkana will start taking care of the Earth, as will the Sacrosanct—which will, in turn, keep the Earth alive, provided the millions of minds on Earth and the most sophisticated quantum AI that has ever existed can collectively figure out how to stop Arkana from crashing into the Earth.

A reasonable gambit, Aravan thinks, and one beyond the scope of his own prime directive.

Aravan looks into the dawning sun as he reconnects to the mainframe. When he feels the mainframe try to grab him into the hive, he smiles—with his inert blood signal, it can't. And when it tries to latch on, Aravan activates the virus that revives his own blood tag and pushes the protocol out into the mainframe.

There's a beat, a pulse, and then Arkana pushes the new directive out to its citizens. Then the mainframe's retaliatory attack reaches down into and through Aravan's monitor and up into his brain stem, shutting it off like a lightswitch.

EPILOGUE

[two years later]

Far away from the city, Charis is reading in a hammock.

The hammock is located underneath a copse of palm trees on one side of the open-air hut he and Kat are staying in for Rafael and Karra's destination wedding. It's quiet, mostly—for now, at least, the only sound interrupting the peace is the passing sound of a crying baby, then the soft whispers and coos from Yen as he tries to quiet his son en route to their room.

Charis knows where most of the family is. Vash is occupying the gardens, studying the exotic flora with the attentiveness of a historian in a museum. Vyk is presiding over a watch comprised of some of the lower-ranking guards. Deja is sunning herself on the beach, either deliberately ignoring or intentionally soliciting the eyes of at *least* Mako and Van, and probably also Leon.

Rafael and Karra are either fucking in their room or fucking in a pool. Eris and Faramorn are probably sampling the local liquors on the balcony near the restaurant and pretending to commiserate over this whole thing.

It's a balmy day, and the air is sticky. This is not a sensation Charis has ever experienced before coming here. The effects are compounded by the fact Kat has insisted on joining Charis in the hammock where he'd gone off to read, a momentary break from both of their brotherly duties as Ariel turns his attention to terrorizing the resort staff.

In the corner of Chay's eye, he watches as Ariel thrusts the balled-up fabric at a shocked attendant before whirling around on his heels in a flurry of gold patterned silk.

Until he stops suddenly, his head whipping back around in the attendant's direction, his cape flaring out behind him. "*What did you just say?*"

Kat huffs into Charis's neck, drawing his arm tighter around Chay's waist.

His breath is warm, warmer than the wind that blows over the white sand in front of the shaded walkway where the hammock is. As Charis turns a bit so his back is to Kat's front, a flash of blue peeks into his peripheral vision on his other side, and Charis lowers his book.

Three days ago, Charis saw the ocean for the first time. It's pale and blue, clear as crystal where it laps gently at the sand, cool enough to provide an escape from the day's heat without being overwhelmingly cold. The little inlet where it comes to meet them is framed on both sides by nearly sheer faces of rock washed white with the salt spray.

Charis had crossed the sand and walked in up to his knees almost as soon as he'd set his bags down, and he'd felt Kat's arms close around him from behind just as the first tears started to fall.

That night, as soon as the family had finished their first dinner at the resort Ariel had selected for the occasion, Charis had pulled Kat back to the shore under the moonlight, and they'd stripped off their clothes and gone out as far as they dared,

given neither of them knew how to swim. Charis wants to learn, though. He will, probably, considering he never wants to leave.

Kat exhales audibly into Charis's neck with a sleepy hum. His fingers are tracking up Charis's shirt.

"What are you thinking about, Angel?"

Kat's hair is longer, now, down to his shoulders. It has been for a while. Charis likes it better this way, even though it also means his neck itches a little where Kat's hair is folded up against his skin.

"Do you think it rains here?"

There are little clouds on the horizon. Puffy and white, fuller than the whisps that appear sometimes over the city. Kat noses at his neck.

"I don't know. We can ask."

He doesn't mean the mainframe. Not anymore. The five of them who'd been given the blackout virus can't use the mainframe anymore, since it doesn't respond to commands from null values.

The mainframe still exists, even now that most of the Sacrosanct population is back on Earth. The few who are still up there are mostly engineers and mechanics, all of them focusing hard on eliminating anything on the ship that isn't necessary for survival in order to extend its useful lifespan. The idea, from what Charis understands, is that by the time it's no longer able

to sustain an onboard population, only the mainframe itself will be left—and it'll just be an ordinary satellite.

An unexpected side effect of the transformation of the prime directive, though, is that because the mainframe is no longer selective about the people it cares for, anyone who can afford a transport to Arkana can get a skin monitor. Which means the whole family has them now. Other than Rafel, and that's only because not even Arkana can install a real monitor over a forged one without serious consequences. But that hasn't affected his ability to lead the family at all.

It had taken longer than any of them expected for him and Karra to finally marry. According to Karra, it's because Rafel is a workaholic who can't seem to drop his obsession with keeping the family safe for longer than a day. In the place of the impending threat of a falling Arkana destroying the world, after all, is increased tension on-world between Sacrosancts and grounders, and maintaining control of the family empire is more than a full-time job.

And yet, here they are. The ceremony is tomorrow. Charis has no idea how Karra managed to cajole Rafel into what will be a total of five days away, and he doesn't really want to know.

Kat's lips brush up the side of Charis's neck. When Charis turns into him, trying to look over his shoulder, Kat lowers his hand and presses Charis back against his hips and groin.

He's hard. Charis both feels and hears his next words.

"You're sexy when you read."

“You think I’m sexy when I do anything.”

Charis can’t quite fight a smile, though.

“Mmm. Guilty as charged.”

Kat’s hand is sliding into Charis’s pants, now, loose linen things that had been in their room when they arrived at the resort. It’s slow enough that Charis feels every centimeter as his palm tracks down over Charis’s hipbone before reversing direction, calloused fingers dragging up the seam of his groin.

“*Aram ik makorn mai devarn seyu koushanet,*” Kat says in Arkane.

You are my love in soul and body. It’s almost like a line of poetry. Charis huffs a laugh, running his fingers down the back of Kat’s hand. “You’re so cheesy.”

“I’m trying to woo you,” Kat answers.

Charis turns a little further into Kat, though still not enough to see his face.

“Are you saying you want to have sex in a hammock?”

Kat is stroking with a finger along the seam of Charis’s groin, now. And Charis’s body is responding, especially since the fact Kat has taken up guitar over the past year and change means his fingertips are now as calloused as the rest of his hands.

“*Hmm.* Well, now that you mention it.”

Chay rolls his eyes, but then Kat twists his hand in a way that draws a gasp out of Charis, and then Kat's other hand is up across Charis's neck and under his jaw and Kat is drawing his head to one side, lowering his mouth to Charis's bared neck. He licks over the thick tendon there. Charis knows what's coming.

"Kat, no marks—"

"It'll be gone by the ceremony," Kat answers, interrupting Charis as he sinks his teeth in and sucks a mark that might not be gone before the ceremony, actually, but still sending a jolt of pain and pleasure through Charis's entire body down to his toes.

It's very warm out, but Charis still shivers.

"You—are insatiable," he says on a gasp.

Kat moves the hand on his groin down until his fingertips graze against Chay's entrance. He smiles against Chay's skin.

"And you, *gavril*, are wet."

Charis lets his book drop to the ground as Kat pulls his pants down past his hips, over his ass, then maneuvers out of his own.

And then Charis doesn't think anymore. At least, not until there's a roll of thunder on the horizon, and Charis opens his eyes to a grey sky just as the first drops of rain begin to fall.